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A NOVEL.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

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Author of "After Long Years," "Miriam's Sorrow," "My Sister Minnie," "Our Guardian," &c.

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REAPING THE WHIRLWIND.

CHAPTER I.

HOME NEWS.

"ANOTHER letter from home," I announced, entering the schoolroom, where, as usual, my sister sat at her 'composition' or some such brain wearying work a full hour before the rest of the girls thought it necessary to make their appearance down stairs. "Shall I read it aloud to you, Gertrude?"

"Oh do, please," she said, without even looking up or ceasing to write. "I can listen just as well while I do this bit of copying, and really I have not a moment to lose—you know I slept an hour too late this morning."

"No, indeed, Gertie, I know nothing of the kind. What I know is that you are killing yourself in your pursuit of learning, and that you will awake one of these odd days to find it all vanity and vexation of spirit. What can a woman want or do with a brain overcrowded, as I am sure yours must be, with an amount of wisdom that would be more than sufficient to divide amongst all the eight and twenty young ladies, myself included, who compose this unrivalled and flourishing establishment? Seriously, and to do a bit of Latin for your especial approval; *cui bono?*"

"Dear child!" said my elder sister, far too intent upon her work either to smile or frown outwardly (whatever she might do inwardly) at the nonsense I was talking, "Will you be so good as to read me that letter in your hand, and then leave me to myself till the prayer bell rings. I must get this German composition ready for the professor."

"Who, bye the bye, is not likely to be very

grateful to you for giving him twice or thrice as many pages to look over as he gets from either of his other pupils—except that Miss Gertrude Beamish, being such a very talented and industrious young lady, is sure to bring laurels to her fortunate instructor in any branch of knowledge—but speaking of German recalls me to the letter you are waiting for me to read to you, my poor patient darling. That mysterious German cousin of ours has turned up, it seems, sooner than was expected, or indeed desired. She is at Lindenhurst now.”

“Do pray read what mamma has written, Ethel,” pleaded Gertrude, and this time with such a really vexed look upon her usually placid face, that I held my tiresome tongue, (as I am bound to confess it was often called,) and proceeded gravely to unfold and read our home letter.

Here it is, just as our dear mother, in her haste and evident preoccupation of mind, scribbled it off to us.

"DEAR CHILDREN,

"You will be surprised at seeing my handwriting again so soon, and still more surprised when I explain to you the object of my writing. It is to entreat one of you to make the sacrifice of your last six weeks at school (I believe it wants about that time to the holidays) and come home to me at once. I would not ask this, knowing how much depends upon the careful completion of your education, had I not a strong motive for doing so. I cannot fully explain myself now. I can only say your cousin Meta Kauffman arrived unexpectedly and unannounced at Lindenhurst a week ago, and that it is of course dull for her—a stranger in a strange land—without a young companion. Your brother, as you know, has no time that he is justified in sparing, to devote to our new inmate, and even if I had myself health and strength for going about with her, she is of too lively and energetic a nature to care for the attendance

of an old woman whose one remaining interest in life is her own dear children. I will only add now that I leave it entirely to yourselves to decide which of you is to return to me—only do let me have the happiness of welcoming one of my darling girls as soon as possible. I enclose a cheque for the journey.

“Guy unites with me in warmest love to you both.

“Ever, my dearest children,

“Your devoted mother,

“ANNA BEAMISH.”

“There, Gertrude,” I said, rejoiced to see that eternally scratching pen laid down at last, and my sister’s eyes turned for a moment from her back-breaking labour; “what do you make out of all this? what dread phantom is haunting poor mamma now, and requiring the material presence of one of her daughters to exorcise? Can you read the riddle, or have all your brains been expended on that erudite and metaphysical production before you?”

"If fancy mamma must be dreaming," replied Gertrude, evidently following her own train of thought rather than giving heed to my questions; "why should a girl of nearly twenty, who comes to England for the sole purpose of working for her bread, expect to be amused all day long like an idle, frivolous young lady who is sent out on a visit? This idea of having one of us home on Meta's account is most unreasonable, and certainly, as far as I am concerned, *quite* out of the question."

"Dear Gertie, make yourself easy on that point. I will go, since mamma wishes it, and since the honours or prizes I may lose, by the sacrifice of six weeks' study, would scarcely be worth talking about. And now, shall I explain to you what it all means, or must I leave you to your scribbling and your present mystification on the subject of this bewildering letter?"

"Oh, just say what you think, Ethel; it needn't take you five minutes; and I should

perhaps puzzle over it instead of attending to my work if you were to defer your explanation—you are certainly a quicker guesser of all kinds of riddles than I am.”

“Not much merit in guessing this, my dear. It is simply, as it seems to me, that Meta Kauffman has turned out to be a young lady of sufficient personal and mental attractions to make a dangerous *tête-à-tête* companion, day after day, for our sensitive, if not susceptible brother; and mamma, who is easily frightened, catches hold of the first straw that she sees floating towards her in this dire extremity. If Meta had only been content to remain in her happy fatherland a few weeks longer, Guy would have been safe at Cambridge, and you and I quite free to devote ourselves to the young person’s entertainment.”

Here I paused, not because my ideas on the subject were half exhausted, but because Gertrude’s look of quiet and, I am sure, unconscious contempt, struck me as infinitely amusing.

"If Meta is a girl of this kind," she said (and what those simple words "this kind" exactly comprehended, I must leave to the reader's imagination, never having quite fathomed them myself), "I am sure she will not do to join with us in school-keeping. We certainly ought to have known something more of her than that she was our cousin, and an orphan, before we proposed the plan which has brought her to England. I wonder, though, whether you are right in your surmises, Ethel."

"Oh, I am sure I am right in saying that mamma is afraid to trust Guy alone with her—but she may be a most proper and unexceptionable *fraulein* for all this. A dreamer and a poet like Guy, would be in far greater danger with a lovely, innocent, unsophisticated girl, than with a designing flirt such as I see you are now picturing poor Meta."

Here Gertrude tapped her foot, a little impatiently, I am afraid, on the uncarpeted floor.

"But, my dear Ethel, you are only making


matters worse, as far as our special object in inviting Miss Kauffman to Lindenhurst is concerned. We want a hard-working, industrious girl, with a thorough knowledge of her own language, and a general capacity for usefulness, to assist us in establishing and conducting our future school. Lovely, innocent, unsophisticated creatures may do for the heroines of novels, or even for the life, if there is such, which consists of holidays and perpetual sunshine ; but they are really quite out of place in the working, matter-of-fact existence which is evidently to be *our* portion. I think if you find, on going home, that Meta is not the sort of person we shall need, you and mamma had better see what can be done about getting her some situation in a private family. I will not destroy my own chance of success in the outset by any association or partnership that might lower the tone of our school. And yet the fact of her being German would have told so well, have had so much weight with most parents having

children to educate. Upon my word, all this is miserably provoking, and has quite spoiled my day's work. Ethel, you have succeeded for once in making me feel as vagrantly inclined as yourself during the precious hour when I like to be busiest. There, I will put all this writing away till after breakfast, though it fills me with remorse to do it, and come and have a turn with you on the terrace. Those lazy girls will none of them be down till the bell rings, and it does seem a very lovely morning."

"Oh, it is indeed, Gertie, and it will do you a whole world of good to emerge from this musty schoolroom. The roses are all wasting their sweetness on the desert air, or on Martha and her watering pot, which are even less appreciative objects. I learnt my page of Italian poetry sitting under the shadow of poor broken-nosed Minerva, nearly an hour ago, and then I gathered a great handful of the trailing roses (for nobody here cares a bit for them) and made them into a wreath for the

head of the dilapidated goddess, as a reward for the shelter she had given me. Come along, Gertie, and see how dignified she looks in the morning sunshine, with her flower crown and—her broken nose.”


My sister and myself had acquired our taste for early rising when we were quite little children, living in our happy country home, under the guidance of the wise and tender father who deemed activity and industry no less essential to the moral than to the physical health of all the juvenile members of his household. So, long before Gertrude began to write French or German compositions in the grey dawn, or I to dream beneath tumble-down statues amongst neglected rose bushes, we had been in the habit of scampering a mile or two over the dewy fields, or through the silent lanes around the vicarage, sometimes with Guy and his dog as our escort, sometimes we two alone, hours before we were expected to make our appearance in the breakfast room, and to recite the little simple



hymn with which my dear father liked us to commence the business of the day.

When he died suddenly in the very prime of health and vigour, our quiet, happy, uneventful existence underwent a change. First of all, as soon as my mother was well enough to be moved with safety, we had to leave the dear old house, to make room for the new vicar, a stranger to us, and an old man who seemed to have outlived human sympathies (if indeed he had ever possessed any) and to be as indifferent to our feelings as he speedily showed himself to be to the duties and responsibilities he had most unjustifiably, I think, assumed.

Then for a few weeks,—such dull, miserable, anxious weeks they were with poor mamma, almost incapable of directing or advising us in any way,—we lived in a very humble lodging in the village, and Gertrude, the eldest and certainly the most energetic of the family, began to talk of getting a few little girls to teach during the day, as a means of



adding to our reduced, and indeed, wholly insufficient income. I don't think she would have succeeded in doing much at that time, being only seventeen herself, and having had only a home education; but the necessity for such a doubtful effort was temporarily averted by the benevolent interference of a distant relative, with more money than education, who gave, as a reason for helping us, the not very flattering one, that we were chiefly women (Guy was only fifteen when our father died) and could not therefore help ourselves. This eccentric gentleman stipulated, however, that he should choose his own method of affording us assistance. He came down to see us in our very modest lodgings, and spent a day or two in looking out for a suitable residence for us, as a first step. There was an old, ugly, large brick house, dignified by the romantic name of "Lindenhurst," to be let on moderate terms, about half-a mile eastward of the village, and this our relative finally decided on, because he said he meant

to make schoolmistresses of the young ladies, and Lindenhurst had, once upon a time, according to tradition, been known for miles round as a flourishing ladies' school. It was, as I have said, a very ugly, unsightly mansion indeed, and had we had only the dear picturesque, comfortable old vicarage to compare it with we should probably have entered our new dwelling — furnished in a somewhat shabby-genteel style by our benefactor—in most discontented and prejudiced frames of mind; but those miserable weeks in the cheap lodgings, where we had seemed literally to be without sufficient air to breathe, had made a vast difference in our estimation and appreciation of many things; and Lindenhurst, with its wide, lofty rooms, and two aced garden (wilderness though this latter was), appeared to us little less than a paradise of delights after our recent experience.

But now that a home had been provided for the family *en masse*, schools must be sought out for the younger members of it.

To mamma's surprise and gratification Mr. King announced his very thoughtful and liberal intention of having Guy educated for the church.

"His father was a parson before him, so let the boy be a parson too; he seems fond of his books, and has a whiter face than either of his sisters. I don't see what else we could do with him."

In this way our really kind relation settled a matter that would, by and bye, make a difference of several hundred a year in his own income; and then, leaving mamma to choose between a private tutor and a public preparatory school for Guy, he turned his attention to Gertrude and myself, and at length selected the expensive and fashionable establishment of the Misses Hooper, in one of the suburbs of an equally fashionable and expensive watering place, as our training school for the profession to which he destined us.

We had spent four years, with the excep-

tion of the usual holidays, very happily at Parnassus House, and were now considered qualified to commence business on our own account. Gertrude was nearly twenty-two, and I just twenty at the period when I have opened my story. We had the promise of two little pupils (boarders) to begin with, and mamma was only waiting our return home and Guy's departure for Cambridge, to fit up the largest room in the house as a school room, and to have the garden, which had been allowed to remain a wilderness during the four years, put in some kind of order. Our cousin, Meta Kauffman, had been invited to join us in our enterprise, under the impression that a settled home would be a great comfort and advantage to her, while her assistance in teaching her own language and anything else in which she might happen to excel, would be an equal advantage and comfort to us.

Poor Gertrude, however, had been very seriously put out by my innocent suggestions

in reference to that young lady, and during our stroll on the terrace (which lasted nearly half-an-hour), she could talk of nothing else, though I tried again and again to draw her attention to the flowers and the birds, and the softness of the lovely morning air.

Even when I brought her face to face with my rose-crowned, and, in spite of time's cruel pranks, still smiling goddess, she only shrugged her shoulders, and said in a tone of barely tolerant good nature :—

“My dear Ethel, I wish you would remember oftener than you do, that you have ceased to be a child, and that now, under the circumstances which your own penetration has suggested, there will be additional reason for both of us to act the woman !”

CHAPTER II.

MINERVA'S SHADOW.

THE three directresses of the establishment of Parnassus House expressed different degrees of consternation—namely, the positive, the comparative, and the superlative—according to their respective natures, when they were informed that I had received a summons to return home immediately. Miss Miranda, the youngest and the most genial of the sisters, thought it a shame that poor Signor Robello, the Italian master, and “such an interesting man,” should lose his best pupil just as the half-yearly opportunity for exhibiting her pro-

iciency in public, and thus gaining him *éclat*, was coming on. Miss Hortensia was of opinion that Mrs. Beamish must really be wanting in sound judgment, not to say common sense, to deprive her daughter, on any ordinary pretext, of six weeks' study at Parnassus House; and Miss Hooper herself—a very strong-minded lady indeed—hesitated a whole day as to whether she might not resist the mandate altogether, and send “a bit of her own mind” to the infatuated Mrs. Beamish, in lieu of the daughter she had so very thoughtlessly and improperly asked for. But in spite of all this, I knew from the first that my fate was decided; and I went on with my packing and other preparations as fast and comfortably as if the idea of my leaving Parnassus House had been received with rapturous satisfaction by the amiable ladies who reigned and ruled there. Not that I was without regrets, and even some sorrow, on my own account, in taking a premature leave of a place where I had been really happy, and of some few com-

panions to whom I had been warmly attached; but from the moment I had read mamma's letter, the fact had been clear to my mind that I, and not Gertrude, would have to make the sacrifice required of one of us; and, somehow or other, I had always found it easy to reconcile myself quickly to whatever was inevitable. I had only to feel quite sure that it *was* inevitable, for my imagination to set to work to discover a gleam of light, if not an actual sunbeam, breaking through the darkness—any amount of darkness—that might be threatening to overwhelm me. In the present instance there was indeed nothing very dark or very dreadful in returning sooner than I expected to do to a happy though singularly quiet home; but as there were manifold reasons why I should have preferred staying at school till the end of our time, I had to set over against all these reasons the pleasure of a few weeks with Guy before his college life began.

I loved this brother of mine very dearly. I believe I had a warmer admiration for his

good qualities, a greater tenderness for his faults, a more perfect appreciation of his character generally, than either mamma or Gertrude ; though by them, too, he was cherished with the fondest affection, and petted and indulged rather more than would have been safe for a vain or an inferior nature. I don't mean to imply by this that Guy had any remarkable superiority of mind or disposition. I am afraid if I made such an assertion here that what I have to tell of him in the story I propose writing would seem to give my words the lie ; but I do mean distinctly to affirm that his faults and weaknesses were not the very small, contemptible ones of vanity or selfishness, and that therefore he was in less danger of being spoiled by an excess of affection than many men would be whose surface characters might present a far larger amount of moral strength than my poor Guy's could boast.

I think mamma had judged unwisely in not sending him to a public school, but she could

not bear the idea of parting with all her children at once, and so as Mr. King (having somebody he wanted to help to a situation) rather inclined to the home education plan, a private tutor had been decided on to prepare my brother for Cambridge; and for the four years during which a young man's character usually receives the strongest impressions, he had lived, with his books, completely out of the world, and growing every day less fitted for the battle he would certainly by and bye have to fight in it.

At nineteen Guy Beamish knew less of what is called "life," but which I imagine means the crooked and wicked ways of man and womankind, than many boys of twelve who have been sent out to rough it amongst their fellows. He was just what I designated him in talking to Gertrude about mamma's letter, "a dreamer and a poet," not a poet who would ever perhaps be likely to sing his songs in the public ear, or bend to receive the bay crown at the hands of an admiring multi-

tude, but a poet to himself and those few with whom he would care to hold intimate communion of thought and feeling—and a dreamer both from habit, and because, no matter what his outward circumstances might chance to be, the ideal would always have a far greater hold upon his mind and intellect than the real.

These sort of characters are somewhat rare in our present very active and material age, and it is well that they should be so, for they purchase their shadowy and usually very brief happiness at a price that no sensible individual would be particularly desirous of paying for such a doubtful good.

Thus much have I deemed it necessary to say about my brother before introducing him personally to the reader. Henceforth I shall allow his own words and actions to speak for him, only asking all those who cannot in any way sympathize with him or his trials, to mete out their judgment tenderly, and as they themselves would wish to be judged.

To go back, then, to the commencement of

this rather long digression, I repeat that I took comfort in being so abruptly torn from Parnassus House and its inmates from the reflection that I could by no other means have seen anything of Guy before he went to Cambridge. Even this thought did not hinder me from feeling a little too sentimentally inclined for a rational young lady on the eve of becoming a schoolmistress, when, my packing all done, I had nothing to think of but the friends I was going to part with perhaps for ever, and the old familiar scenes associated with pleasanter memories than any later experience might be able to chronicle and dwell upon.

Gertrude, who regarded me quite in the light of a martyr on account of the solid educational advantages she thought I was abandoning, did all she could to help me and cheer up my spirits during those last two days of my sojourn at Parnassus House; and between her and my own few particular friends I had not much time to myself, nor many opportunities

for indulging in the solitary wanderings and dreamings I had always been rather addicted to. Nevertheless, I stole one quiet hour, before any of the household were stirring on the morning of my departure, to pay a farewell visit to my dear friend Minerva of the imperfect nose, and to reflect calmly and soberly—as calmly and soberly as I could at least—on the old life that was passing away from me, and the new life whose dawn was so near at hand. A grey, quiet dawn, not promising a noon of brilliant sunshine, or even a sky undimmed by clouds, but at the same time giving no threatenings of fiercer storms than usually fall to the lot of every-day, commonplace people such as I knew myself to be.

Perhaps I had learnt so much of wisdom from my frequent sittings under the shadow of Minerva; but I would fain, now that she and I were about to part, have gathered for future use some deeper lessons from her overflowing storehouse; some rich, genuine ore,

that should bear, and shine the brighter for, the world's rough handling.

I am afraid, however, that at the most it was only a little gold dust that I picked up and hid away during that one hour's lonely musings on classic ground, amongst the wild, trailing rose bushes in the early summer morning.

The broken-nosed goddess seemed to smile benevolently and encouragingly upon me, as I hung round her well preserved neck the last wreath of flowers she would ever receive at my hands, and left—silly school-girl that I was—a great round tear upon the shoulder, which for a moment supported my head before I moved away, half laughing to think that I had cried, from the old favourite sunny spot, for ever!

CHAPTER III.

GUY.

BOLTBY was the name of the small market town to which our modest village was tributary, and at Boltby I arrived per coach just as the soft twilight of a May evening was stealing over the land, and giving to meadow, wood, and stream, a chastened beauty, such as the fairest amongst them could never wear by day. My long journey had tired me a good deal, but I lost all sense of fatigue as the coach drew up before the arched gateway of the principal inn; and, extricating myself from my cramped position, as *vis-a-vis* to a very

stout old gentleman, whose happy slumbers I had been afraid of disturbing, I sprang to the pavement, and, quite heedless of appearances, threw my arms round the neck of a tall young gentleman, who at the moment of my descent was, oddly enough, looking another way.

“ My darling Guy, didn’t you see me before, or were you dreaming that the substantial conveyance I arrived in was only a phantom coach, and that the real one was coming in an opposite direction? You dear old boy, how nice it is to be with you once again!”

“ Why, Ethel” (kissing me very affectionately, if a little less impulsively than I had kissed him), “ you are as much a madcap as ever, and looking—if this sober light is to be trusted—handsome and blooming enough to fascinate in any character you pleased. I knew you were in the coach, my love, but the anxious friends of your fellow passengers thronged the narrow way, and hindered me from approaching nearer. Shall I enquire now about your luggage?”

"Oh, that will be all right, dear, thank you. I have had it directed to come on by the carrier to-morrow. Guy, what is the matter with you to-night? you are peering into that misty distance again."

My brother turned to me, rather shortly I fancied, though he smiled as he held out his arm.

"Come, Ethel, we have a walk, you know, of nearly three miles before us, and it is getting late for young ladies to be out alone. I mean," he added quickly, as I scanned his face in astonishment, "for young ladies who have travelled since early morning, to be out at all. Are you very tired, my love?"

"I was, till I saw the dear old Boltby streets, and the back of a certain young gentleman, whose face on all former occasions has been the first to greet my longing eyes. Tell me now, however, all about home, and mamma, and—our new cousin."

"Lindenhurst has not 'suffered change' that I am aware of since you last beheld it,

Ethel. Our mother is about as usual, taking into account the inevitable excitement attendant upon your expected advent; and as for our new cousin, I think you will soon be in a position to judge of her for yourself, as she half agreed to meet us somewhere in the fields between this and home. Am I walking too fast for you?"

"By no means;" (which assertion was scarcely true, but as my thoughts were travelling even faster than my legs, I did not much mind being whirled along at masculine speed for a little while), "by no means, Guy, dear—but why did not Meta come the whole way with you?"


"She said it was too far for her. She does not appear particularly strong. I am almost sorry there was any question of her coming at all. The coach was beyond its time, and I began to fear she might walk on beyond the distance she originally intended. It will be nearly dark in another half hour."

I was no longer in the dark, at any rate,

concerning my good brother's eccentric movements; but I only said now, very innocently and unsuspiciously, "Oh, we shall be sure to stumble upon her in a minute or two—she will probably be sitting romantically upon the top rail of the stile in the bend of the next field. How delicious the fields are to-night, Guy! but just tell me, in compassion to my weak, feminine nature, whether Meta is pretty or not, and if you like her."

"Girls' questions," he said, a little scornfully (young men of nineteen are of course so superior to all this sort of thing), "but I won't be hard upon you to-night, Ethel,—poor dear Ethel! walking herself out of breath too because she won't own that I am going faster than she likes—shall we rest here a few minutes, my love?"

"Certainly not. I am good for another mile at the same pace, but I want to know whether Meta is pretty, and how you like her."



He had no choice now but to reply frankly, "Perhaps you will not consider her pretty ; my mother does not. I am an indifferent judge of women's faces myself. To me she appears rather good-looking than the reverse ; and then for your second question—I think I must acknowledge that I like her — you, Ethel, will like her too."

"Shall I ? are her attractive qualities so undeniable that you can answer at once for my being subdued by them—has it been thus in mamma's case ?"

"Oh," he said, and I fancied rather petulantly, "Mrs. Beamish has a trick of concentrating all her admiration and all her affection upon her own children. We, who are the gainers by it, ought not to murmur ; but it certainly gives Meta a poor chance in that quarter."

"I believe mamma is just to all ;" I answered, and then paused abruptly as we reached at that moment the summit of a rising pathway, and were looking down on the

stile I had just before alluded to in the hollow of the next field.

Somebody, sure enough, was sitting there now—not indeed on the top rail, but on the wooden plank which traversed the low stile, and served as a first stepping stone to those who had to climb it. This somebody was a woman, and even at the distance which intervened when we first discovered her, we could see that she was bending forward with her face buried tightly in her folded arms, and that her attitude generally was suggestive of utter absorption in her own meditations, if not in some agitating subject of personal grief.

“Guy, is that Meta?” I asked, breaking off abruptly from what I had been saying, and no less disposed now than my brother to quicken our pace.

“Yes, that is Meta—she is tired, poor child! and does not see us yet. I hope nothing is the matter with her,” he continued anxiously, as we almost ran down the hill.

“ I never knew her hide her face like that. Ethel, let me get on before you, and find out if there is anything wrong—you won’t mind following this short distance alone?”

Whether I minded it or not, I was clearly to have no choice in the matter, for as Guy spoke he dropped my arm very unceremoniously, and darted down the precipitous path at a speed I should, under no circumstances, have been inclined to emulate. I walked leisurely on, watching Meta, who, hearing the rapid footsteps coming towards her, had raised her head, and was sitting in an erect and natural posture, at least a minute before my brother stood beside her.

What passed at their meeting, of course I could not learn, but in a second or two she took his arm, and they both began very slowly to ascend the hill in my direction.

I soon made out now that Meta was below the middle height, that her movements were easy and even rather graceful, and that her face (under the broad brimmed hat she wore,

and in the gathering darkness) looked somewhat piquante and interesting.

Then we had reached each other, and the introduction and greeting took place.

"It seems I frightened this good cousin of mine by my strange attitude," Meta said in pretty broken English, as we continued our progress towards home. "The truth is, I was thinking very intently—thinking is useful to all of us sometimes, is it not? and when I want to think seriously I must shut out external objects. I must see nothing but the visions of the mind—you comprehend me, Ethel?"

"Yes," I replied, as Guy pressed my arm, (could it be to draw my attention to the profundity of wisdom expressed by this speech?) "but I am afraid on such a night, and with these green, silent fields around me, I should not have courage to retire within myself, however desirable or useful such an act of mental discipline might be."

"Oh your English fields are beautiful,

beautiful!" said Meta, kindling into sudden enthusiasm—"everything is very beautiful around Lindenhurst. I am happy to have come to so charming a home."

"You speak our language remarkably well," was my next observation. "I should scarcely have expected you could have acquired so much from your father, considering how young you must have been when you lost him."

"I was nearly twelve," Meta explained, "and then, since my mother's death, I have been occasionally thrown amongst English people again. I like the English—oh so much!"

"Do you? Were you ever a governess in an English family?"

"No; not exactly that. I have, however, taught German to English children, going out by the day—not very recently, for my health was rather bad, and I stayed as you heard with my godmother—she who wrote to your mother about me."

"Yes; but we never knew where you were, or how employed, between the period of your mother's death and that of your return to Madame Jozeau. Were you teaching all that time?"

"Oh, not quite," Meta said, with what appeared to me rather a forced laugh. "Occasionally I was visiting some German relations, and occasionally, when I had saved a little money, travelling to improve myself. It has been something of a vagrant, Bohemian life, mine," she added, with a sigh that appeared far more natural than the laugh which had preceded it; "but I have reached a peaceful haven at last, and I am so very thankful."

"Poor dear Meta!" Guy said, in a tone that gave double meaning to his words; but I said nothing; and soon after we arrived at Lindenhurst, when our new cousin, declaring herself very tired, went to her own room and appeared no more that evening.

It was not until I was myself undressing

and preparing for bed some hours later, that mamma and I had any opportunity of speaking confidentially together concerning the stranger who had come amongst us, and who was already, by one member of the family at least, regarded in the light of a very dear friend.

“Of course I know,” said my mother, sitting down upon my little bed, and folding her hands on her lap as she invariably did when speaking about anything that greatly interested her, “of course I know that Guy is just at the age when boys of his sensitive and romantic nature are sure to fall in love with the first pretty girl who may chance to be thrown in their way; and I know, too, that in all ordinary cases this calf-love is an exceedingly harmless and fleeting sort of thing—but somehow I am afraid, unless he and Meta can be quickly separated, it will come to a very serious matter with your poor brother, because not only are all his feelings earnest and enthusiastic, in no common degree, but Meta herself, though I don’t like the girl,

has certainly at times a strange fascination about her, which, more than any amount of mere physical beauty, would be likely to deepen and render constant a man's affection towards her. Nothing could have been so unfortunate as her coming just at this time."

"Dear mamma," I said, "don't let it worry you too much, however. Guy will soon be gone, and now that I have come home he can have no excuse for leaving his books to dance attendance upon Meta. You do not of course think she cares about him?"

"Oh, no! I have seen nothing in her conduct to inspire such a belief, nor can I say that she has appeared to court his admiration (probably she looks upon him as too much of a boy to make it worth her while even to flirt with him), and yet she must be conscious of his growing interest in her, and I think with this consciousness she should have contrived to avoid his society more than she has done."

"How old is she herself?"

"About twenty-six, I believe; but she looks singularly youthful from her extreme fairness. I do not consider her in the least pretty, but there are moments when her face quite startles you on account of some extraordinary attraction which you suddenly discover in it, and which, on a second glance, may entirely have passed away. Her hair is certainly the most beautiful, both from its colour and length, I ever saw."

"I shall be curious to examine this young lady by daylight. Do you think she left to-night because she was really tired, or from a kind feeling that we might be glad to be alone?"

"Guy would be ready to swear it was from the latter motive. Perhaps it was. I am afraid I am sometimes a little unjust to the poor child. You and Gertrude will probably be able to make up to her by-and-bye for what she must have found lacking in me. It will be all right and comfortable no doubt when once Guy has got safe away."

I wondered what mamma meant by "safe away," because my own strong impression was that had he started that very night he would have been no more safe from Meta's influence than he would be if he remained with her another twelvemonth. I did not express this thought, however, because my mother looked so worried and anxious. I only kissed her and said I was very glad to have come home to share her little troubles, and perhaps to help in dispersing them.

Then she wished me good night, and I went to bed to dream of Guy and our bright-haired German cousin.

CHAPTER IV.

META.

I WAS first in the breakfast room the next morning, and while I stood at the wide bay window looking out admiringly on the improved state of things without—on the recently mown lawn and on the freshly planted shrubs, mamma came softly behind me, and wound her arms—mother's fashion—round my waist.

“It is so pleasant to have you here, my darling,” she said, as I turned quickly and paid back her caress with interest, “I always feel ten years younger when my girls are with me. Have you seen Guy or Meta this morning?”

"No, I did not know that Meta had left her room, and Guy one never expects to see till breakfast is half over. Is our new cousin an early riser?"

"Yes, and Guy too since she has been here. They crossed the lawn together, while I was dressing, half an hour ago."

"Well, come," I said, noticing that poor mamma's look of anxiety had returned to her face as she mentioned this circumstance, "we must acknowledge that Meta's influence has been in the right direction here. Guy was really shamefully lazy, and he would have found his indolent habits a great inconvenience at Cambridge. Shall I make the tea, mamma?"

"Yes, love, if you are ready yourself. I daresay they will be in directly."

Guy came in first, a minute or two after we were seated at table. He said that he had not been with Meta for some time, that she had refused his companionship, declaring that she preferred walking alone. He did not even

know what direction she had subsequently taken.

"I should have been so glad to have had an early stroll with you, Guy dear," I put in here, "Why did you not come home for me?"

"I did not think of it," he candidly acknowledged, and then, guessing perhaps that this spontaneous frankness might be a little painful to a sister who loved him as I did, he added instantly, and with a heightened colour, "I don't mean I did not think of you, dear Ethel, but simply that it never occurred to me to come back to the house for the purpose of asking you to walk with me."

It is a bad sign when people deem an elaborate apology necessary for any apparent slight or want of affection.

"Quite forgiven, Guy," I said, with a smile, "Another morning I will invite you to a ramble with me, and perhaps Meta, if she has by that time had enough of solitary wanderings, may be tempted to join us."

Meta walked quietly into the room as I spoke, and laid her straw hat and grey mantle on a side table.

"Am I very late?" she asked in a pleasant and half deprecating voice, addressing my mother, "I really meant to give my cousin Ethel a good opinion of my punctuality; may I kiss you, Ethel dear, in our foreign fashion?"

Guy was seated close to me at the breakfast table, and I could scarcely forbear smiling as I observed the looks of unconscious envy he directed towards me as I was receiving Meta's cousinly salute. And unquestionably it was a dainty pair of lips that bestowed the double kiss upon my unappreciating cheeks, and to my thinking, even then, as attractive a face altogether, without being an absolutely pretty one, as I had ever looked upon. I don't know what it might have been, divested of the bright golden hair that formed a complete and wondrous halo round it; possibly the total absence of colour in the complexion,

and the extreme lightness of the eyes might have given what is called a "washed out look" to the countenance in general (though when the eyes were animated they alone sufficed to preserve their owner from the charge of insipidity) but with that marvellously beautiful and marvellously abundant hair, Meta Kauffman was, in my opinion, a woman to be gazed at twice by the coldest beholder, and to be most enthusiastically admired and worshipped by a romantic, dreaming boy like my brother Guy.

A good deal of this occurred to me as I poured out my cousin's coffee, and otherwise ministered to her creature comforts at our simple family meal. She did not talk much herself, and as Guy appeared to have enough to do in watching and waiting upon his idol, the conversation, such as there was, had to be carried on chiefly between mamma and myself.

She, too, must have had a more than ordinarily pre-occupied mind, or the interesting

information communicated to me just as breakfast was ending, would not have been so long delayed.

"Oh, Ethel," she exclaimed, abruptly, "think of my forgetting, till this moment, to tell you that our new vicar has arrived, and that he is to preach for the first time next Sunday. I have not seen him yet; but great excitement and expectation prevail in the village, as he is not only a single man, but, report affirms, especially good, and especially charming."

"Anybody would seem especially good and charming after that weary, dreary Mr Dallas," I replied, rather flippantly; only Mr. Dallas really had been most unfit in every way to be a clergyman; "but what is our new vicar's name?"

"The Reverend Harold Wyke," answered my brother, this time, as Meta, having finished breakfast, and not being as yet exceedingly interested in our village gossip, was leaving the table; "a fine sounding name, isn't it,

Ethel, promising quite a hero of romance for you young ladies. Anyhow, you'll have the start of Gertrude, for he's sure to call here in a day or two. I left a card at the vicarage yesterday."

It was not altogether like Guy to indulge in foolish jesting of this kind, but it did not require a vast amount of penetration to discover wherefore the advent of an amiable charming, single man, such as Mr. Wyke was described, was not wholly agreeable to him.

"And thus," I answered merrily, "I shall be rewarded for so quietly yielding to Gertie the privilege of remaining till midsummer at Parnassus House. I thought such extraordinary virtue *must* meet with a speedy recompense."

"Well," said Guy, with an abrupt return to his usual seriousness, as his eyes followed Meta's movements about the room, "I suppose I should only be considered in the way of you young ladies if I volunteered to give

up my books for your sweet sakes this morning—is not that about the truth, Ethel?”

“Quite so, my dear Guy,” was my ready answer, interpreting mamma’s pleading countenance; “I have no end of unpacking and putting in order to get through, and I have been indulging in the hope of having Meta to assist me in my labours.”

“I shall be very pleased to help you,” said Meta, kindly and cheerfully; and so we two, without any further discussion, went away to my room upstairs, and were soon too busy to have either time or inclination for much promiscuous gossiping.

About twelve o’clock, however, I fancied that my companion was beginning to look tired, and I asked her if she was in the habit of taking anything between breakfast and dinner.

“Not often,” she said, sitting down then and half closing her eyes, as if her head were aching; “sometimes, since I have been here, your brother has made me drink a glass of

wine when he has persuaded himself I wanted it; but, indeed, I don't think I ever require anything of the sort, only this poor Guy seems to have such an anxious nature."

Now I did not quite like this "poor Guy" from her, so I replied a little stiffly (we English have always got our natural stiffness ready for every occasion)—

"He has a very kindly nature at all events, and until his sisters returned, of course Guy felt bound to look after you, as our guest, in an especial manner. He knows that poor dear mamma, with the warmest heart and the best intentions in the world, is apt to forget the minor duties of hospitality towards those who may have become domesticated with her. But shall I fetch you a glass of wine now, Meta?"

"Oh dear no, thank you," she said, while the faintest of all faint smiles hovered round her lips; "I will rest for ten minutes on this chair, and then I shall be quite right again. Are you always strong and well, Ethel?"

"Generally; I should not otherwise be fit

for the duties I hope soon to undertake. Teaching, I think, requires, above most things, abundance of health, energy, and good spirits."

"Yes, it does indeed," she said, and then sighed, as if the subject, or continued fatigue from the exertions she had made on my behalf, oppressed her.

"Do you dislike teaching very much?" I inquired next, remembering all the charges Gertrude had given me to find out the suitability of this young person to be our colleague.

"Oh, not particularly," she said, rather languidly. "I have not abundance of health or energy, or even good spirits, perhaps, but I have a fair share of patience which, I have heard, is useful in teaching, too."

"Most useful," I acknowledged—"and I am glad to hear that you are possessed of it. For my own part it is not a quality I can boast of, but Gertrude is the very soul of patience, and of nearly everything else that will be required in our vocation, I think. If my sister were not such a pretty creature (I

am sure you will admire her excessively, Meta), I should say she was just made for a schoolmistress."

Meta remained in thought for a second or two after this. Then she said, abruptly:—

"Are you much interested in the coming visit of the new clergyman your mother was speaking of at breakfast time, Ethel?"

"I—no, not in the least. I am afraid I have rather the bad taste to dislike clergymen as a class. Old Mr. Dallas, Mr. Wyke's predecessor, was such a very unfavourable specimen, and then at school we regarded the clergymen as our natural enemies, because they would preach such outrageously long sermons—more especially in passion week—which we unfortunate girls were required to write from memory. Oh, no, I am at present most comfortably and sublimely indifferent on the subject of our new vicar—why do you ask?"

"Simply because I happened just at the moment to remember what Guy had said. Is

your beautiful sister as cold—I mean as matter-of-fact—as you are ?”

I laughed in unfeigned amusement at this. “Why, really, Meta, I never heard before that I was either cold or matter-of-fact. I have rather the credit of being the warm, impulsive one of the two sisters—more like Guy than Gertie is. She, indeed, is not cold at heart, dear girl, but singularly demonstrative, and as matter-of-fact as an old maid of fifty.”

“Not prone to fall easily in love, I suppose, then?”

“Good gracious, no; we are neither of us that, thank goodness! we have had other things to occupy our minds: and besides, I don’t believe we have ever seen a human being whom it would have been possible to fall in love with. You certainly ask odd questions, Meta.”

“Do I? but you see in my country we are more imaginative and dreamy than in yours. We read poetry and romances from our

cradles, and so we naturally grow up romantic, and perhaps—not strong minded. I think the English are far wiser and more to be approved.”

This was spoken with every appearance of sincerity. I came down a step or two from the heights of contempt, which I had been gradually ascending, and whence I had rather pharisaically surveyed my poor little German cousin. Then, half in curiosity, half in a generous willingness to bend my own strong mind to her weaker one (the acknowledgment on another’s part of any inferiority makes us wonderfully magnanimous and indulgent towards the acknowledger) I assumed an interest in the subject she had chosen, and in my turn became the questioner.

“I presume then, Meta, that you have had a larger experience in these kind of things than you would have had as an English girl ; you *have* been in love, perhaps ?”

For an instant there was a sudden rush of blood to the pale face,—not a soft, conscious

blush, such as my half laughing enquiry might have been expected to excite,—but a terrible agitation, marked in other ways than the rapid change of colour, in the whole countenance. The remembrance of something very serious, of something very real, must have been brought before the girl's mind by my thoughtless question. I felt this so strongly that I went up to her, in very sincere penitence, and said I was grieved at having touched an apparently tender string—I should never have thought of anything of the kind if she had not suggested it to me.

“Quite true, Ethel,” she replied, making a tolerably successful effort to resume her calmness of look and voice. “I was mad and foolish to talk such nonsense to you, good, true-hearted, unsophisticated English girl as you are. But I am quite rested now; pray set me to work again.”

And I did so, continuing while I worked with her to talk on the most cheerful subjects I could think of, and managing from time to

time to steal a glance at the pale face which changed no more its expression that morning.

After dinner Guy attached himself to us for the rest of the day, and, although I had planned to sit quietly at home and chat with mamma, I had no choice, for her peace of mind's sake, but to accompany Meta and my brother in a long ramble through the fields, which, as it was excessively warm, tired me a good deal, and did marvellously little in the way of hindering the impassioned boyish homage that Guy seemed constrained to offer to his cousin, and that his cousin lightly, gaily, half-mockingly, I thought, at times, was content to accept.

Poor Guy ! For all the use I was likely to be to him I might as well have remained to glean a little more wisdom from my friend Minerva, in the gardens of Parnassus House.

But this conviction I resolved to keep to myself for the present.

CHAPTER V.

OUR NEW COUSIN'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS.

I MANAGED to get my brother to myself for a short ramble on the following morning. I wanted to talk to him on many subjects, as in the old times, and especially to lure him to speak to me unreservedly about Meta. I thought that with a nature such as Guy's, a locked-up passion would acquire tenfold intensity, and all questions of worldly expediency, and disparity of age, and mamma's prejudice against our German relative set aside, I had a very strong feeling on my own account that this attachment would not do—

that it would work nothing but misfortune to Guy, and sore trouble and bitterness to all of us. I did not dislike Meta; I was even conscious of a very kindly interest in her; I fully believed there was a good, pure spring down somewhere in her heart, and yet I shrank from the idea of her becoming Guy's wife as much as I could have done had I known her to be altogether evil.

Of course I was not going to let him discover, at this early stage of the matter, any of my sentiments on the subject, or even that I suspected more than a cousinly interest on his part towards the new member of our family. So I talked very freely and cheerfully of Meta Kauffman on this first occasion of my being alone with Guy, and had, at least, the reward of discovering that by no other possible means could I have made myself so agreeable. Not by any word confession, however, did my brother betray himself. Poor boy! there was indeed no need for this, even had my powers of observation

been less quickened by sisterly anxiety than they were. A first love in an ardent, impassioned nature, has little chance of concealing itself, notwithstanding the jealous care with which the very sacredness of the feeling impels the lover to veil it from the vulgar eye. I knew that morning, when, at the conclusion of our walk, I took my place at the breakfast table by my brother's side, that his whole life had become merged in the life of another, as surely as if an angel from heaven had proclaimed the fact to me.

And little experience and little wisdom as I had myself, I could not but feel that a very serious calamity had befallen him. Even had the object of his attachment been altogether worthy, and likely hereafter to prove a helpmeet for him, he was too young and had far too scanty a knowledge of life to render it either a good or a healthy thing for him to abandon his whole soul to one absorbing affection. He had his way to make in the world—a position of some kind to achieve,

very grave and important studies in connection with the profession he had himself chosen, (and hitherto appeared wholly contented with) in prospect, to complete; and without any special gift of prophecy one could easily see that with Meta Kauffman in the foreground, all these matters would lose their prominence and distinctness in poor Guy's vision, and that with him there would be nothing of a mundane nature very clear, except the necessity for obtaining, sooner or later, the means of translating his idol to that rose-embowered cottage, which, from time immemorial, has been the goal of all young lovers' hopes and ambition.

I knew this terrestrial paradise was in his thoughts when he said to me that morning, in reply to some half-laughing remark of mine concerning his future elevation and usefulness in the church:—

“I don't expect great things for myself, Ethel—I scarcely even wish them. I have not enough energy or steady industry to

become a clever, much less a popular preacher. A curacy to begin with, in a pretty rural village would quite content me, and then later, when circumstances might demand an increase of income, a berth such as our vicar here has got, for instance—a charming, ivy-covered house, and four hundred pounds a year.”

“But such berths,” I said, “don’t usually come simply upon their being wished for. You must either have an undue share of patronage (which I think I have heard you express yourself strongly against), or you must do something to merit so plentiful a supply of the loaves and fishes our church has to bestow. I rather thought, Guy dear, you had the ambition to become an extra faithful, hard-working clergyman.”

“Oh! of course I have had my dreams and my visions,” he answered, a little sadly it seemed to me, “but after all, what do these things amount to? One never does, you see, Ethel, achieve the greatness or the goodness that youth draws pretty pictures about.

I hope I shall do my duty, as the catechism says, in that station of life unto which it may please God to call me; but I don't expect to go much beyond this, and I would seriously advise you, my good little sister, not to expect it for me."

I did not; since a woman, with a fair face and beguiling voice, had taken the place in my poor Guy's heart which God and duty ought alone to have filled.

A letter from Gertrude that morning decided my work for the day. I would find out exactly what Meta's accomplishments were, and satisfy my sister's anxious mind as to our cousin's eligibility or non-eligibility for the specific duties she had come to England to perform.

Meta showed a cheerful willingness—not unmingled perhaps with a little conscious superiority—to display her varied talents for my approval. First of all she played and sang to me for nearly an hour, not because I required anything like that time to determine

as to her capabilities, but simply because the peculiarity of her style and expression charmed me so much that I forgot my character of judge, and, assuming that of an admiring and delighted listener, entreated her to go on and on till she was fairly tired herself, and laughingly begged me to take her place and give her breathing time.

"No, Meta," I said, "I cannot consent to the humiliation of playing or singing after you. I have some decent theoretical knowledge of music, having learnt it, from the beginning, with the view of becoming a teacher myself; but I could no more charm rocks and stones and human hearts in your fashion, than I could write a treatise on algebra, or take in the profound mystery of the national debt. Has Guy heard you play and sing?"

"Once or twice," she replied, carelessly, though I fancied her pale cheek had warmed a little at my honest admiration. "But I am fond of music, you see, and feel it, so there is no great merit in my being a toler-

ably good performer. Shall I fetch my drawings now, Ethel?"

"Yes, please do," I said rather absently, for my mind was full just then of Meta herself, and not of her accomplishments. "If, at least, I am not boring or wearying you too much."

"Far from it," she answered cheerfully, rising to leave the room, and certainly her face expressed sufficient animation and pleasure to satisfy my conscience on the subject. "You must be prepared, however, for a very moderate amount of artistic skill in what I am about to show you."

By this time I was prepared for anything, for I had begun to look upon Meta Kauffman as specially gifted by the fairies; and assuredly her drawings were not calculated to weaken the impression her rare musical talents had made upon me. They were bold, full of originality, and, altogether, something quite different from the tame, feeble specimens of art I had been in the habit of

criticising or executing at Parnassus House. Most of those I now saw were from nature ; the copies were few, and had, even as copies, less merit in them. Only one, a girl's face in crayons, which I could have sworn was Meta's own, aroused my instant attention, and separating it from the rest I turned it eagerly to the light (while she was stooping to pick up a parcel that had fallen from the portfolio), and read in very minute characters in one corner of the sketch the single word "Alan."

"Meta, this must be meant for you !" I exclaimed, as my cousin, still ignorant of what I had found, kept bending over the drawings. "But who is Alan, and when—"

I could not get beyond, for Meta, with a sudden spring and cry, had snatched the portrait from me, and was standing with a white quivering face, and painfully troubled aspect, by my side.

I thought at first she was angry with me, however unreasonable such a feeling would have been, but, when she spoke, her voice only

betrayed intense vexation, mingled with some stormier emotion in which I, at least, could have no concern.

"I beg your pardon, Ethel; that portrait is not mine. I had no idea of its being there, or anywhere. I cannot imagine how I could have been so stupid. I thought—"

She paused here, looked earnestly at the portrait for a few minutes, while I looked no less earnestly at her, and then tore it deliberately in small pieces and scattered them out of the open window.

"What a pity!" I said involuntarily, but to this I did not add another word. Whatever my curiosity on the subject, there was something in Meta's face which forbade my asking a single question, or making the simplest comment on what had occurred. In a few minutes she was apparently quite herself again, and giving me an animated account of some of the scenes from which her sketches had been taken.

I wrote to Gertrude that afternoon, and on

the subject of Meta Kauffman this is what I said :—

“Our new cousin is altogether a wonderful being. I cannot be surprised at the fact—clear enough to the most casual observer—of Guy having lost his heart to her, but it is none the less a matter to be deeply and seriously regretted. As regards her qualifications, she is undoubtedly the most accomplished person, without even excepting my darling Gertie, whom I have ever come in contact with. I cannot help admitting that she would be a great assistance to us if we obtained pupils above the ages of fourteen or fifteen. But I am not sure that you will either like her or approve of her as a constant associate for the young people who may be entrusted to our care. Mind, I know absolutely nothing against her, and am, perhaps, like mamma, inclined to judge with too little charity one whom poor Guy has with equal

haste accepted as a type of all perfection. I want you to see and criticise our foreign relative, Gertie, before we decide on either keeping or dismissing her. In the meantime, I shall continue to exert my own indifferent powers of observation, while doing my best to make our very quiet home agreeable to this young lady. Guy leaves us in another week, whereat dear mamma, in spite of the dreaded pain of parting, is unfeignedly glad. I should be so, too, if I did not feel sure that the mischief—as far as his heart is concerned—has been irretrievably done. However, we must hope for the best. He is young enough to get over a first love if separated entirely from its object, and I have not the slightest fear of any engagement being entered into between them. Meta may flirt with this poor enthusiastic boy, and receive his homage in the absence of a more exciting amusement ; but, mark my words, Gertie—she will never marry him ! I have only time now to add how I

long for the holidays to come, and to assure
you that

“I remain always,

“Your very loving sister,

“ETHEL.”

CHAPTER VI.

THE REVEREND HAROLD WYKE.

I HAD been at home four or five days before our new vicar called upon us. Then he enquired for Mr. Beamish (it was of course only Guy who had left his card at the vicarage) and seemed surprised, not agreeably, I am sure, at finding there were ladies in the family.

My mother and myself were working together in the drawing-room when he was announced—a tall, thin man, with large and rather strongly marked features, a quantity of dark, curly hair, and a general aspect of

extreme shyness, which gave an awkwardness to his manners, and imparted for the moment a corresponding embarrassment to those who had to receive and welcome him.

This was the sum total of the impression made upon me by the Reverend Harold Wyke on the occasion of his first visit to Lindenhurst.

Mamma, for her part, soon got over the feeling of strangeness which his want of personal ease had inspired, and after slightly introducing me as her youngest daughter, and telling our guest that her son would make his appearance immediately, she entered into the most friendly conversation imaginable, and succeeded in dispelling a considerable portion of the shyness that had sat so ill on this strong-looking, middle-aged man, when he found himself unexpectedly in the presence of two unknown ladies.

The first voluntary observation he made enlightened me as to the fact of his previous ignorance of our existence.

"I was so stupid," he said, still seeming to be meditating speculatively on this stupidity, "as to picture Mr. Guy Beamish an elderly bachelor, living amongst dogs and horses. I never thought of wife, mother, or sister in connexion with him. Strange that our imaginations should so often mislead us in reference both to things and individuals we have yet to become acquainted with."

"Very true," replied mamma, who was more of a practical than an imaginative turn of mind—"but there is no necessity for this occurring when there are people around us who can enlighten us on the subjects we are ignorant about. It may be a womanly weakness on my part, but I think if I were to settle in a new locality, I should have the curiosity to enquire about all the people I was likely to be brought in contact with."

"I would not do that, on principle," Mr. Wyke said, with a smile that made him look much more amiable than he had yet done—"because I should never afterwards feel sure

that I had formed an unbiassed judgment concerning any of the persons I had thus enquired about. Ten to one, in asking even as to the numbers comprising the different families, I should get my informant's own opinion of the characters, tempers and dispositions of at least half the members of them. Besides, in this particular case, as I am a total stranger at Lindenhurst, I could not possibly have made enquiries, unless I had gossipped with my servants; and this also is against my principles, a little."

"And you and your principles may become just a little of a bore," I thought (with an inward smile at my own presumption) as the door opened and admitted Guy—Meta demurely following.

It was quite wonderful to see how much sooner and more completely Mr. Wyke appeared at home with Guy than he had done with us. In five minutes they were talking together as freely and pleasantly as if they had known each other for years, and the

vicar, having learned my brother's intended profession, expressed a kind and apparently sincere regret that his stay would now be so short in the neighbourhood. .

"I should have been so glad to give you any assistance or any hints in my power," he said, "before your Cambridge term began; but come to me while you are at home any evenings you can spare. I am quite sure to be alone, and you will be heartily welcome."

While Guy was thanking him in the warm terms this friendliness undoubtedly merited, and dear mamma, whose heart was quite won now, was looking complacently upon them both, I turned myself a little round that I might see what had become of Meta.

I suddenly remembered that we had all forgotten to introduce her to Mr. Wyke, and I thought it not impossible that the young lady might have taken umbrage at our neglect.

She was standing just then with her back towards us, at some little distance, and appa-

rently examining the outside of the books that were scattered for show on the centre table. I noticed what I had failed to do on her entrance, that she had made a more elaborate and coquettish toilet than it was her wont to do, that in fact she was dressed very prettily and becomingly—for the Reverend Harold Wyke, I naturally surmised—and, though having small sympathy with coquetry in general, I could not help feeling a little sorry that so much preparation should have been thrown away, in consequence of our breach of good manners in omitting to introduce the lady and gentleman to each other.

I was considering how I might contrive even now to draw her into our circle, when, unconscious, of course, that I was watching her, Meta slowly turned her head and directed, what appeared to me, frightened, wondering eyes towards our wholly unobservant visitor. I use the word unobservant advisedly, and not in reference to Meta only, for Mr. Wyke had never once raised his eyes since the first mo-

ment of his entrance into the room, and if he saw anything beyond the pattern of the carpet he must have been gifted with some secret and mysterious powers of vision not granted to ordinary mortals. I am quite sure he had not yet seen me, and yet I had spoken more than once, and each time he had courteously, at least, replied to me.

But it was Meta who claimed my whole attention now, making the shy vicar of Graybourne only a secondary object. There could be no doubt that the whole expression of her face, as she turned it momentarily towards our guest, denoted extreme fear and wonderment. Could it be possible that they had met before, that she had any reason to dread meeting him again? Already this girl had harassed and tormented me more than enough with the mysteries surrounding her. There were too many interests at stake, in connection with her meditated sojourn amongst us, to render me very scrupulous or cautious as to the means I might employ in discovering something of

her antecedents. I watched silently another minute or two, and then, just as I fancied I detected a design on my cousin's part to steal unnoticed from the room, I said aloud, interrupting a dialogue between the two gentlemen—

“Mr. Wyke, pray forgive me for intruding upon your argument for a moment, but we have all been guilty of an omission in not introducing our German relative, Mademoiselle Kauffman to you. Meta, my dear (turning and fronting her steadily) pray come and be sociable in the light, instead of dreaming there in the dark all by yourself.”

Meta's face flushed a little, but had, I thought, something of a proud, defiant look in it as she complied with my request and emerged from her obscurity, Guy hastening to place a chair for her next to mine, but no more grateful to me, I am sure, than she was herself, that I had thus brought her into notice.

He need not have been uneasy, however, as far as Mr. Wyke was concerned, for that ec-

centric gentleman just raised his head as I named our cousin, glanced absently for an instant, first at me and then at Meta, and having bowed slightly to the latter—without the smallest token of recognition to satisfy me, or of admiration to alarm Guy—returned to the argument I had interrupted, and during the remainder of his visit never once seemed conscious of the existence of either of the ladies of the party.

“A woman-hater beyond all doubt,” I said, laughingly, when he had taken his departure, and we were comfortably discussing the merits of our new vicar amongst ourselves, “and I, for one, am not the least attracted by him—what do you think of him, Meta?”

“I suppose he may be very good,” she replied, coldly (and by this I knew she had not forgiven me for detecting her agitation in the drawing-room), “but I have heard it said that good men are always disagreeable, and Mr. Wyke seems to form no exception to the rule.”

Poor Guy ! how delighted he looked at this speech, which was evidently quite genuine, and how very warm and enthusiastic were his own praises of the Reverend Harold Wyke after Meta had thus spoken. I believe some of the wisest and the best of men can forgive another man anything rather than a woman's admiration of him.

My mother had listened quietly to all we young people had to say on the subject of our late visitor, before she volunteered an opinion of her own, and even then she only observed that Mr. Wyke was too shy and nervous to make a thoroughly useful clergyman in a parish like ours, where women certainly predominated, and she hoped he would soon get a good, hard-working wife to help him in his pastoral duties.

"You had better tell him so, mother," exclaimed Guy, who was now in charming spirits, holding a long skein of Berlin wool for Meta, "and perhaps you might recommend a lady, and even make the offer for

him, in consideration of his unfortunate bashfulness. There are—let me see—the two Miss Downings, and Jane Norton, and the little widow at Primrose Cottage—by-the-bye, I would give something to be a mouse in the corner when he pays his first visit there—and Alicia Clarkson, and your own two fair daughters for him to choose from. Surely he may find a helpmate amongst all these?”

“And what has poor Meta done that she should be excluded from your list?” asked mamma, raising her eyes (invariably anxious now), to Guy’s beaming face. “You must not set it down as a fact that a young lady’s first impression of a gentleman is always irrevocable. I have often known women marry the men they have positively detested at a first interview.”

Poor, foolish Guy coloured to the very roots of his hair, and Meta, either out of pity for him, or from some other motive, replied rather sharply—

“Guy understands me, in this case at least,

better than you do, Mrs. Beamish. When I take a real dislike at first sight, I never entirely get over it. Besides, I should, of all women in the world, make a wretched wife for a clergyman."

It was quite curious to watch the effect of these last simple, and, as I believe, unpremeditated words upon two of the persons who were listening to them. My mother's countenance positively brightened all over, while Guy became so pale and dejected in a moment, that in spite of much genuine pity I could not help feeling some amount of anger towards him—anger that he should, in so short a time, have made this girl the controller of his destiny, and given to her the power of tinging with happiness or misery every hour of his life.

I don't think Meta noticed what was going on. Though she had entered into our gossip about Mr. Wyke, her mind was evidently preoccupied, and neither Guy nor his future profession had been in her thoughts when she

spoke about being an unfit wife for a clergyman. Soon after this, my brother said he must return to his books, and then we all separated to our different occupations till dinner time.

CHAPTER VII.

GOSSIP.

ERE the conclusion of that day we were fated to have the new vicar brought prominently, and, in a somewhat fresh light, before our minds again.

The Misses Downing, with their niece, Jane Norton, paid us a friendly visit in the evening, and readily accepted mamma's invitation to stay to tea. The genteel inhabitants of Graybourne were rather partial to drinking tea at each other's houses, especially when any little unusual event had occurred in the village or neighbourhood to form a cheerful

topic of conversation. The advent of a new vicar, and he an unmarried man, was of course eminently calculated to promote the kind of gossip that single ladies are supposed to delight in, and I was quite sure, the moment I saw the three spinsters I have just mentioned, that two of them at least had come charged with eloquence on the same subject which had been interesting our own family circle all the morning.

A very few words will give the reader an introduction to the Misses Downing and their youthful *protégé*.

Miss Downing was a lady of about forty years of age, with a tall, stately figure, and the remains of considerable personal attractions. She was strong-minded, healthy, energetic, and of very decided literary tastes, which had more than once induced her, it was said, to open a correspondence with the Editor of a local paper, and to offer to supply both the poetry and the leading articles on very moderate terms, as well as to regale the Editor

(who lived at Boltby) with tea and toast whenever he felt inclined to walk as far as Graybourne. No one seemed very clear as to the result of these overtures, but Miss Downing was always suspected of being the author of several heroic and didactic compositions which from time to time had appeared in the poet's corner of the "——shire Instructor," and which were signed vaguely "Semiramis."

In temper and disposition Miss Downing was really a pattern to elderly spinsters in general, being cheerful, contented, and, as far as appeared on the surface, entirely reconciled to her lot. The little widow at Primrose Cottage said, indeed, that she had by no means relinquished all hope of escaping from the despised sisterhood yet, but then that little widow wasn't a bit charitable towards other women, and could not quite forgive Harriet Downing for looking so well and handsome at forty years of age.

The second sister, Miss Dora, was an

invalid, and very romantic. She had long, fair hair, which she wore in ringlets that were always out of curl, and somewhat wiry in texture; but her blue eyes were soft and pensive, and there were some sweet tones in her low and rather melancholy voice, which, united with her general appearance and invalid state, gave her a claim to be reckoned by most persons of the other sex as an interesting woman.

Jane Norton, the niece whom these kind-hearted ladies had adopted on the death of her parents, was a bright-eyed girl of about eighteen—not pretty, not graceful, certainly not clever, and yet with a quaint, odd charm about her that it would be very difficult to define. Her aunts were fond of her, and allowed her to do exactly what she pleased—the consequence was, she did nothing (when she was not playing with the cat) but a little dubious needlework on her own account, and spent altogether as idle and useless a life as could well be imagined. Miss Downing, however, on first hearing of our project of opening

a school, had suggested that Jane should come at least twice a week to take lessons in music and French; and the young lady, in whose nature must have existed a latent craving for novelty of any kind, eagerly accepted the offer, and borrowed a huge pile of books (I don't think she ever looked into them) to "get up" the little French she had acquired some years previously at a provincial boarding school.

And now that I have so far introduced these three amiable women, the reader must imagine them seated at our tea-table, and endeavouring, each in her different way, to contribute to the sociability of the party. Of course the vicar was not alluded to at once. Everybody knows how common it is to fence about, and keep off to the last moment that subject which is really nearest to the heart and uppermost in the thoughts; but at last, in a sudden pause of a sufficiently animated conversation, Miss Dora, in her soft, languid voice, asked my mother if Mr. Wyke had called upon her yet.

The affirmative answer was the signal for the real business of the evening to commence.

“Only think,” said Miss Downing, in the tone of one who is conscious of the importance of communicating an unexpected piece of news — “only think of his being a widower, instead of a bachelor, as we had naturally presumed, after all ; and with a little girl too, who is to arrive next week from her grandmamma’s. I am sure I never was more surprised in my life.”

When we had each of us said how much surprised *we* were, and how strange it was, and how stupid we had been not to think of at least the possibility of such an interesting state of things, Miss Dora (who had finished her tea and retired to the sofa) spoke again —

“You see, Harriet is so courageous, and always has her wits about her. She asked Mr. Wyke, point blank, why he had never married, and he replied, poor dear man ! without once raising his eyes —

“ ‘Madam, I lost my wife two years ago ;’ and then remained silent. I certainly thought

he might have said—‘I had the misfortune to lose my dearest wife,’ or—‘I am so unhappy as to be a widower;’ but he just put it in those few cold words, and so I suppose he had not been very happy with her. It was I who enquired whether he had any family, for Harriet appeared a little shocked at his answer, and indisposed for further questioning.”

“My dear child,” Harriet inserted here, with the air of an offended empress; “I am in the habit of having, as you admitted just now, my wits always about me, and these enabled me at once to detect a rebuke to my curiosity (as he deemed it), in our vicar’s answer. Although afraid of no man, I would not willingly subject myself to a similar reproof a second time. But pray continue your history.”

“Oh, there is not much more to tell,” resumed Miss Dora. “He seemed, I fancied, to brighten a little, and in spite of himself almost, when he spoke of his child. It was a

girl of about eight, he told me, very delicate, though he hoped not unhealthy, and she was to arrive with her nurse from her grandmamma's next week. I immediately thought of you and your sister, my dear Ethel, and ventured to ask if he intended putting her to school. Then he said in a very sudden and decided manner, 'Heaven forbid!' and I grew nervous and could not pursue the subject. I hope, however, when he knows you he will change his mind, and that little Margaret Wyke (I did contrive to discover her christian name), will become one of your pupils."

After thanking Miss Dora for her good-natured zeal on our account, I enquired whether they had gained any further information relative to our new pastor and his family. I saw that Guy was amused for the moment by this feminine gossip, and he had been looking so dejected since the morning that I was glad of anything to win him from his gloomy thoughts, which I knew had Meta for their object.

"We did our best to extract something more from him," Miss Dora frankly acknowledged ; "but he went away almost immediately after he had spoken about his little girl. I only got out of him that he had already called on old Mrs. Hallam, of Beechwood, and the widow at Primrose Cottage."

"That must have been glorious fun," said Guy, rousing up in earnest now. "Of course, Miss Dora, you insisted on his telling you exactly what he thought of the bewitching Mrs. Arnott?"

"I certainly asked him, Mr. Guy, how he liked her, and if he did not consider her very youthful-looking for a widow. Harriet says, she is certain that a perceptible shudder ran through his frame before he ventured to reply to me, then he only observed coldly—'I endeavour to refrain from judging any one at first sight. Mrs. Arnott's youth did not particularly strike me.' I felt really quite abashed and confounded, Mr. Guy, by his

severity, and my sister, to relieve me, began talking of the Hallams, and saying how much we all liked and admired Alicia Clarkson, the old lady's companion. Then this strange man brightened up once more, and said (quite warmly, for him)—‘She is indeed a very sweet, good girl; I knew her some years ago in London.’ This was another surprise for us, but he went off before there was time to ask a single additional question; and so now you have the whole result of our courage in the general cause, and I do think we deserve a vote of thanks from the entire community at Graybourne.”

“I quite agree with you, Miss Dora!” exclaimed Guy, getting up with a carefully suppressed yawn, and following Meta and Jane Norton to the other end of the room, and presently into the garden. And then the nearly threadbare subject was allowed to drop, and the rest of the evening devoted to equally interesting discussions between mamma and

Miss Dora, concerning the latter's ever varying ailments ; and between Miss Downing and myself, concerning literature and female education in general.

CHAPTER VIII.

PARTING.

ON Sunday we all went to hear Mr. Wyke preach, and we were all, in a nearly equal degree, charmed with the simplicity and earnestness of his sermon, so different to the dry, sleepy lectures on morality we had been accustomed to for years from the former vicar. In the pulpit Mr. Wyke's painful shyness totally disappeared. He seemed to forget himself entirely in the deep interest and solemnity of the message he was delivering; and I don't believe there was an individual in the whole congregation who did not leave the

church that day with the conviction that Graybourne had gained something better than a merely agreeable man for a friend and neighbour.

Old Mrs. Hallam stood, as she was about to get into her carriage, to shake hands with him, and to tell him, in her quaint, off-hand way, that she had paid him the rare compliment of keeping awake till the end of his sermon. We were all standing in the porch when this occurred, and I had just been saying a hurried word or two to Alicia Clarkson, the grand old lady's companion. Poor Mr. Wyke, divested of his black gown, was nothing but a plain, shy, awkward man again. He blushed, as a girl might have done, at Mrs. Hallam's speech, but the next moment, discovering Alicia, turned and greeted her in the most friendly manner. Her extreme calmness seemed to set him at his ease—there was something about Alicia Clarkson that I think acted as a sort of charm on most people—and when the Beechwood carriage had driven

off, he lingered yet a few minutes to say a kind word or two to mamma and myself, and to ask when Guy (who had walked on with Meta) was really going to leave us.

I observed that day at dinner, when, as a matter of course, the conversation was again directed towards the new comer amongst us, that of all the ladies Guy had mentioned as eligible for Mr. Wyke, if he desired to marry a second time, I thought Alicia Clarkson would be the most likely to suit him.

"He could not choose a better wife, scarcely a prettier," my mother said warmly, for everybody was fond of Alicia; "but I fancied you girls had long ago made out a romance for her of which Edmund Hallam was the hero. Why is he now to have a rival in this grave, middle-aged widower?"

"I don't know, but I imagine he will have, if he doesn't come down oftener to look after his lady-love. And then we all know that any attachment between those two (I mean Edmund and Alicia), could be only a matter

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of romance and bitter disappointment after all. Mrs. Hallam will expect a countess for her peerless son at the very least."

"I am not so sure of this, Ethel. This Alicia is an immense favourite with the old lady, and I shouldn't wonder (if the alternative was to lose her altogether), that she gave way, and accepted her as a daughter."

"How nice it would be," I said, "to have dear Alicia one of these days, mistress of Beechwood," and then I was abruptly recalled from the pleasant castle I had begun to build (my organ of constructiveness was immense) to answer a question of Meta's relative to this mother and son whom we had been speaking of.

I could only tell her that the old lady was a very wealthy widow, and had purchased Beechwood, the great white house standing in its own woods between Boltby and Graybourne, on the death of her husband, a cotton spinner, who had made a vast fortune by his own industry, and in virtue of his wealth,

allied himself to a lady without a penny, but with some blue blood in her veins. How they had lived together—the plebeian and the aristocrat—no one, in our circle at least, seemed to know; but one son was the result of their union, the Edmund Hallam alluded to in connection with his mother's companion, and who, in some of the pauses of his idle life, would come down and occasionally spend two or three months at a time at Beechwood. Once a year the old lady always went to London with her young companion, and on these occasions the son resided with them, and accompanied them everywhere. Alicia never voluntarily spoke of this gentleman, and perhaps that was one reason why Gertie and myself had fancied she liked him, but when questioned on the subject, she said he was agreeable, intelligent, and to her, personally, very kind and considerate. We small people of Graybourne only knew him from seeing him at church on the occasions of his stay at Beechwood, for although Mrs.

Hallam had spasmodic fits of hospitality towards the surrounding families, we had none of us ever happened to be invited to Beechwood while her son was there. She often sent Alicia to pay a round of visits for her in the village, and thus we came to know and esteem this gentle, unobtrusive girl; and to welcome her very gladly whenever she appeared.

When I had told Meta all this she thanked me, and asked Guy if he did not think Miss Clarkson extremely pretty—she thought her lovely, and could quite understand Mr. Hallam having fallen in love with her.

I discovered later that one of Meta's favourite weapons of coquetry was an enthusiastic praise of other women's beauty or fascination.

Of course Guy answered as she doubtless expected, that Alicia was pretty enough, but that he himself could not admire such very still life, that he preferred even ordinary flesh and blood to the most exquisitely chiselled

marble. And then I defended Alicia warmly, and Meta was amused, and ended (not to my brother's perfect satisfaction) by declaring that she should try to make Mr. Hallam's acquaintance, if only for the sake of asking him what he thought of the pure, statuesque beauty of Alicia Clarkson.

Guy was only able to spare one evening of that week—his last at home—to Mr. Wyke, and it was rather to please my mother than himself that he went at all. The new vicar might be a very good, excellent man, and quite disposed to become a kind friend to him, but there was an attraction at Lindenhurst that threw every other of whatever nature into the shade, and I saw that it was a real trial to him, this one lost evening, as he considered it, at the vicarage. ♣

Poor Guy! I did so thoroughly and entirely pity him during those few last days that he spent at home. My mother had implored me to prevent, as much as possible, any private walks or talks between him and Meta,

and while I had every inclination to oblige her I could not help feeling sometimes like a contemptible spy upon them both, and wishing I had never been sent for from school. For my own part, too, I could not quite share mamma's great fear on the subject; I could not think that however Guy might plead—and plead no doubt he would as often as he had a chance—Meta would consent to anything like an engagement. I believe at that time she had a sort of platonic affection for him, a half grateful, half amused recognition of his boyish and impassioned devotion to herself; but that it was, or ever would be, more than this, I no more imagined than I imagined Meta had revealed to us the whole truth concerning her antecedents.

At length the last morning arrived, and Guy came down to breakfast looking very much as if he had passed a sleepless night. Meta was not in the room when he entered; she generally walked out alone before breakfast, and often lately had only returned when

our meal was half over. But this morning she was tolerably early, and came in with a subdued, pensive look upon her face, and a spray of wild honeysuckle in her hand.

"For you, Guy," she said, laying it beside his plate, and taking her usual seat next to him. "I thought you would like some remembrance of the dear Graybourne lanes when you were far away from them. Will you accept so very humble an offering?"

"*Will* I accept it?"

The tone was very low, for the voice shook as he spoke, and there came a sudden glowing red into his cheeks that I knew he would fain have had none but Meta see. My mother saw it, however, and finished her cup of tea in an almost stern silence. If this girl had no answering love in her own heart, how dared she play thus cruelly with another's deepest and most serious emotions?

"I have yet nearly two hours," Guy said, as we all moved from the breakfast table.

“Mother, shall you be able to come to me in my den presently?”

“As soon as you like, my son,” was the reply, in very unsteady accents. “Ethel will see to the collecting of your luggage, and perhaps (as both the servants are busy this morning) Meta would not mind walking to the village and ordering up a fly to take you to Boltby.”

I was certain that mamma (who was the most methodical person imaginable) had purposely managed not to have the fly bespoken before, that Meta might be sent out of my brother's way at the last moment; but although the smile with which this request was met, evinced a perfect knowledge of its meaning, the young lady at once expressed her readiness to do the errand, and even added that she should enjoy the walk.”

Guy was, I think, on the point of uttering some protest against this arrangement, but then he suddenly checked himself, and left the room quietly with his mother.

They were closeted together for more than an hour, at the end of which time Mrs. Beamish came out with very red eyes, and joined me in the hall where I was still employed in labelling the different packages.

"I have been talking to him about Meta," she said in a whisper; "and I find on his part it is even more serious than I imagined. He does not think she cares for him. An hour ago I should have said, 'God grant she never may!' but poor boy, he is so wholly wrapped up in her, so wretched in the thought that his love is unrequited, that I declare I am puzzled what to hope in the matter. It is a miserable, miserable affair, altogether, and Heaven only knows how it will end."

"Not in his marrying Meta," I replied decisively. "Even if she should consent, I myself, would move Heaven and earth to prevent it; but, mama, dear, she will not. I am certain of it. Are they together now?"

"I don't know. Guy told me he was going to look for you in the parlour. Leave

these things to me, Ethel, and see where he is. In half-an-hour, or less, the fly will be here."

So I went to the parlour and, opening the door rather noisily that I might not, in the event of my brother and Meta being within, appear to come upon them as a spy, I saw them standing close together at the far window with their backs to the outer door, and evidently talking very earnestly.

Before I could make my presence known I heard from Meta the words. "I never shall forget you, dear Guy—you ought to trust me for so much at least," and then I spoke aloud, and the hands which had been clasped were hastily unloosed, and they both came with somewhat conscious faces (though in Guy's grief predominated) slowly towards my end of the room.

I did not leave them again during the few minutes Guy had now to remain with us. I loved my brother too fondly to feel inclined to relinquish him entirely to any other in

these last sad moments ; but I am bound to acknowledge, however humiliating such an acknowledgment may be, that I might as well have been shut in my own room for any special notice I received from him.

It was Meta who had his last words, his last look, his last sigh ; and even the true, devoted mother strained her eyes in vain, as the carriage drove off with him, in the hope that perhaps one stray, parting glance might be directed to her loving and wistful face.

Poor mother ! your reign is indeed over. Never, never again to the end of life will your place—the first and holiest place—be found in that heart whose every feeling you have watched with such anxious tenderness for so many patient years. The new love has entered in and is sitting “all glorified” on her too firmly established throne. Time only can decide what the result of this strange and novel dominion will be.

CHAPTER IX.

UNDER THE CHARM.

It took my mother and myself some time to rally from the depression which had fallen like a cloud upon us from the moment of Guy's departure. We missed him every day, almost every hour, and the home from which he had never before been absent, seemed scarcely like home to us without him.

It was at this time that Meta became, oddly enough, a real comfort and support to my mother, and a something that appeared very necessary and pleasant to me.

As long as Guy had been in the house,

manifesting continually that he worshipped even the air she breathed, he had been her chief object of interest, and either through the promptings of vanity or some deeper feeling—this remained to be proved—she had exerted all her powers of fascination on his behalf. But now that he had gone, instead of sitting down, as we were weakly inclined to do, and selfishly lamenting his departure, she brought her numerous and varied talents into action, to amuse, and charm, and win his grieving mother and sister. Perhaps just at first, mamma, knowing the extent of Guy's devotion to Meta, was a little inclined to resent the gaiety and light-heartedness she exhibited in his absence; but very soon she began to yield to the charm of this perpetual sunshine around her, and to acknowledge—grudgingly, however, at first, because of her early prejudice—that Guy had a fair excuse for the madness which he was cherishing. I think it not impossible that the inevitable necessity for associating these two always in

her thoughts had helped my mother, in some slight degree, in getting up a sort of tender interest in Meta. A mother who loves her son very fondly and passionately, can scarcely help, in the end, giving a little love to the woman who is dearest in the world to him, unless, indeed, through jealousy, she is constrained to hate her—and hate had no existence in my mother's gentle nature.

It was on the occasion of Meta being invited to spend a whole day from home that I first opened my eyes to the fact of her having become what she was to both of us. There had sprung up a kind of intimacy—I can scarcely call it friendship—between herself and the young widow at Primrose Cottage, and one morning, when Guy had been gone about a fortnight, Mrs. Arnott called at Lindenhurst, and, in her little peremptory way, insisted on carrying off Meta, and keeping her till the evening. Of course, Meta being willing, no objection was made

to the proposal, and the two went away together almost immediately.

I, for my part, had plenty of work to do that morning, for a quantity of school books, and maps, and other things had arrived from London, and these were to be looked over, sorted, and arranged in the school room. I thought I should be quite glad to have an hour or two to myself; I had no idea in the world that I should miss the society, or feel lost without the help, of this strange, incomprehensible girl who had so recently appeared amongst us, and, as it turned out, bewitched us all—but so it really was. Her constant flow of spirits—her powers of amusing—her thrilling, bird-like voice, which from time to time would burst out in disjointed snatches of wild German melodies, her readiness and aptitude in doing any single thing that was required of her, and perhaps above all (for I wish to be quite candid in detailing her fascinations) the subtle skill with which she could

administer flattery to those she sought to win or please—all these were things to be missed and longed for when suddenly withdrawn—and, though I meant to make a profound secret of the discovery, I had discovered, during my two hours solitary labours on that June morning, that Meta Kauffman had grown to be the very light and sunshine of our quiet home.

I looked rather curiously into my mother's face when we met at our early dinner. She was not in good spirits—that was evident—and I asked her, as we sat down, if she felt unwell.

"No, dear," she replied, with a smile meant to reassure me, "only I have seemed to miss your poor brother this morning more than usual. I don't know how or why it should have been so ; perhaps the heat of the weather has depressed me a little—it is very warm to-day, Ethel, is it not?"

"A very lovely day, mamma, and not too warm for you to have a short walk this after-

noon with me. I am tired of work, and don't intend doing any more until to-morrow. I fancy the habit of working in company makes one rather disinclined for solitary industry."

"Oh, to be sure, you must have missed Meta," said my mother eagerly, and as if she experienced quite a relief in attributing to me some of the same feeling she was more than half conscious of herself; "she is really a good-natured, useful girl, after all, Ethel."

"Have you missed her, mamma dear?" I asked, with an amused smile at the thought of the humiliating defeat we had both sustained.

"I suppose I have—a little," she replied, smiling back at me. "It seems somehow when Meta is beside me as if I had only lost part of your brother. I can never disunite the two in my thoughts now; but my own dear girls know my heart too well ever to be jealous, I hope!"

If mamma added this because she fancied she read in my face any sentiment even remotely

bordering on jealousy, she might have spared the apologetic words. I was not thinking of myself at all. I was thinking of Guy as Meta's fond and adoring lover, and of Meta as giving probably but the lightest and shallowest cousinly regard to Guy. I said aloud—"Then you no longer shrink from the notion of this Meta as your daughter-in-law? If she were willing to accept Guy, you would be willing to accept her—is it not so, mamma?"

"My dear Ethel, your question put in those plain terms, is difficult to answer. I am quite sure, had mothers the privilege of choosing wives for their sons, Meta is one of the last persons I should have chosen for Guy. Even as it is, I sincerely regret his having met her; but the great and extraordinary love she has inspired in him—no boy's passing fancy this—changes the whole aspect of affairs, and leaves me only the ardent desire to see her with his eyes, and to be enabled to love and trust her for his sake. I think, Ethel darling, we must all try to do this now."

"Mamma, you are still blind on the most important point," I said, speaking more seriously than I had yet done. "Do believe that the attachment we have been referring to is all on one side. Meta cares no more for Guy in that way than she cares for—for Mr. Wyke, or any other man as yet unknown to her. I am certain of it."

"Has she told you so?" my mother asked, growing a little white and nervous over the subject, or, it might be, over this particular view of it.

"No—we scarcely ever talk together of Guy; but I am clear about what I have said; nevertheless; she may break his heart, or rather he may be determined to break it for her sake, but she will never marry him."

"Oh, Ethel, I cannot think so ill of her. She knows his devoted love, and she writes to him sometimes. What object can she have in this, and in seeking to win our love and esteem as she has done, if after all her own heart is wholly untouched?"

"I do not pretend to know her object," I said, "if indeed she has any definite one. I only feel sure that she has not the least notion of becoming more to Guy than she is at present. As for her heart, mamma, I am inclined to think she is not troubled with such a possession. How often we hear of the most fascinating people in the world having no hearts of their own."

"Ethel, I fancied you were beginning to like Meta very much."

This was spoken almost reproachfully, and I answered warmly in self-defence,

"You were not mistaken. I acknowledge her marvellous powers of captivation, through which my reason and judgment have been completely beaten out of the field. I cannot help liking her any more than I can help liking the sunshine and the summer air, but even for Guy's dear sake I cannot wholly trust her, or believe that she would be a desirable wife for him."

“You said just now you were certain she would never marry him.”

“Well, I do feel certain of that, and am reconciled to it in consideration of what I conceive to be her unfitness for him.”

“Ethel,” exclaimed my mother abruptly, after a brief pause, “I see clearly that you have no notion of the extent and reality of Guy’s love for this girl. He would not recover her final rejection of him. I have a solemn conviction of this; I know my boy better than any one else can do—and Meta must not reject him. Don’t let us talk more about it now—it agitates me too much; but remember what I have said, and try to get over any remaining prejudice you may have, and which I do not affirm you hold alone, against poor Meta, for as Guy’s life is in her hand, she must and shall save it. Now, ring the bell, dear, and in half an hour I shall be ready to take a little stroll with you.”

I was very much astonished and bewildered

at such a termination to our discussion ; but I saw that mamma was painfully in earnest, that through the suggestions of some deep inward convictions which still probably warred against her private views and wishes, she had arrived at the conclusion she had expressed—and though I neither believed in the absolute necessity for the union we had been speaking of, to save Guy's life, nor in Meta's yieldingness even on these terms, I respected my mother's commands too much to add another word on the subject.

So our walk that afternoon was a somewhat silent and melancholy one, neither of us being much disposed for ordinary chit-chat ; and we returned home to our early tea feeling more than ever (at least I speak for myself) that having once possessed Meta, it was dull and cheerless to be without her.

At this time we had only one servant in our modest establishment—she had lived with us for many years, and in virtue of her faithfulness and good nature was quite a privileged per-

son, notwithstanding the troublesome defect in her character which will be apparent by and bye. Her face that evening, as she opened the door to us, was so unusually shining and “pregnant with news,” that I enquired eagerly if anything had happened.

“The new parson’s here, Miss!” she exclaimed, scarcely waiting to hear my question—“he said he wanted very bad to see missis, as he had brought down his little gal on purpose—such a pretty behaved little gal, miss, with hair in curls and a blue sash—and I said I know’d you wouldn’t be late as you had ordered tea half an hour earlier than usual, having made but a poor dinner, both of you, and I told him as how Miss Meta was gone out for the day, and as we all missed her like, because of her being so merry, and singing about the house, and keeping us all alive; and I put him and little missie in the drawing-room, and I’ve set the tea things in there, because I made sure he’d stay and have a cup with you, and I told him you’d

be very proud if he would, as you was both a bit lonesome like without Mr. Guy or Miss Meta, who would come home before 'twas dark, I told him, as missis didn't reckon her very strong, and was afraid of the night air; and I told him—"

"That will do, Betsy," interrupted my mother in her quietest and firmest voice—nothing but extreme quietness and firmness ever could stop the torrent of Betsy's wonderful eloquence; "and less than half of all you have said would have done for Mr. Wyke. You must make another effort to get out of your ridiculous habit of communicating our domestic concerns to strangers. You had better make the tea at once, since it appears you have invited the vicar to stay, and bring it into the drawing-room."

"And I will go and take off my bonnet," I said, for laughing at Betsy, though her peculiarity was a very old joke in the family now, had quite exhausted me, hot and

tired as I was from my walk. "We little expected such an honour as this, mamma."

"No," she replied; "but I am very glad to have an opportunity of improving our acquaintance with Mr. Wyke. You, Ethel, must try what you can do to amuse his child. Children always take to you at once. And arrange your hair neatly, my dear."

CHAPTER X.

ENTERTAINING THE VICAR.

I LAUGHED again, as I stood for a few minutes before the glass, at the idea of mamma having told me to arrange my hair neatly for Mr. Wyke. It is true she would have done the same had the most intimate of our female acquaintances been going to take tea with us, for unless specially admonished I was apt to be a little careless in respect of personal tidiness; but the notion of taking the smallest additional trouble to look well for Mr. Wyke struck me as extremely ludicrous. I did not believe he would know the face of one of his

lady parishioners from another, if he lived amongst us for twenty years—and when I joined the party below I was still struggling to regain the amount of dignified gravity with which I deemed it proper to greet and welcome our very grave and dignified vicar.

Mamma rose to leave the room for the purpose of laying aside her walking dress as soon as I entered.

“Mr. Wyke is good enough to say he will have a cup of tea with us, Ethel. I shall be down directly, and you may ring to have the tray brought in at once.”

She spoke cheerfully, as if the thought of entertaining this reverend gentleman had quite dissipated her fatigue, and imparted new life and spirits to her. I wondered first, and then felt indignant that it should be so—what could anybody see in a shy, heavy, uninteresting person like the vicar of Graybourne, who, except in the pulpit, appeared as if he had lost his way in the universe, and alighted on our social earth by mistake. His

voice, however, had, I fancied, a touch of human kindness in it as he broke in upon these flippant thoughts of mine by saying:

“You see I have brought my little girl, Miss Beamish, to make your acquaintance. Margaret, come and shake hands with this young lady.”

A small, delicate looking creature with blue, wistful eyes, and an aspect of painful nervousness (evidently inherited from her father) laid down at this summons a tempting picture book, with which Betsy had thoughtfully supplied her, and crept timidly to where I was standing.

Did any marvellous instinct reveal to her that at the same moment she had crept into my heart, or was it only the natural gift I possessed for attracting all children, that caused Margaret Wyke to become at once and for ever at home with me? I cannot tell. I only know that after one hasty glance into my face the little soft hand insinuated itself gently into mine, and the

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This was candid, at least, and in a measure, might be termed confidential. I looked up at the speaker with a smile that would come to my lips, and said—

“I see nothing for it in this dilemma, Mr. Wyke, but educating her yourself. Why not?”

“I don’t play the piano, or sing, or draw, Miss Beamish,” he replied, more than half inclined, I thought, to smile too; “but I have taught Maggie to read and write, and I suppose to these accomplishments I could add Latin and Greek by-and-bye. Is this what you would recommend?”

“Scarcely. I have no fancy myself for learned ladies, but I gave you the best advice that I could, under the difficult circumstances.”

“So you did, and I am very much obliged to you. I wish—”

At this moment my mother re-entering the room, the vicar’s wish died upon the air, as I was sent at once to the tea table, and little

Margaret came with me and soon claimed my whole attention.

Mamma and Mr. Wyke talked chiefly about Guy while the tea drinking was going on, and I did not join in their conversation at all. In the brief intervals of my chat with Maggie I listened to what they were saying, and felt half amused and half irritated by the vicar's very slow enunciation, and by the ridiculous way in which he still kept his eyes perpetually bent upon the ground.

I said to myself I should certainly shake him a hundred times a day if he were my father, or brother, or ——. No, that other word refused to write itself clearly even in my thoughts, which went meandering on, in quest of new subjects of entertainment, leaving the good, prosy vicar altogether aside.

"Will you take me into your pretty garden?" whispered Maggie, while Betsy was removing the tea-tray. "I like flowers, and it is so warm here—papa won't mind our going."

"Come along, then," I said, gaily, almost as glad as the child to have an excuse for leaving mamma and her new friend to prose together. "We will have a scamper over the lawn—a race if you like—and then you shall hunt for ripe strawberries in the kitchen garden."

"Margaret is not strong enough to race with you, Miss Beamish," exclaimed the vicar in his severest tones, as we were hastening out of the room; "and be kind enough not to let her eat too much fruit, as she is easily made sick. She had better have her hat on."

"All right," I replied, shortly, feeling I should exceedingly enjoy stamping at him. "There are not a dozen strawberries in the whole garden, and if your little girl gets tired, I am quite strong enough to carry her. Come, Margaret."

So we went without any further remonstrance or suggestions from Margaret's anxious parent, and in a few minutes were enjoying

ourselves as thoroughly as if no such monitor existed, or had tried to alarm us into a decent propriety of conduct.

"I can run races as well as any body," the little one said half whisperingly, and closing both her hands tightly over mine, "only papa always thinks I am not strong enough to do anything. I should like to play more than I do; my nurse says I ought to play with other children, but papa is afraid I shall get hurt, or tired, or something. Perhaps he will let me come sometimes and play here."

"I hope so, Maggie, dear," I answered, stooping to kiss the small, pale face that I thought might not unnaturally awaken a father's anxiety; "but by-and-bye I shall not have much time for playing with you. I am going to keep a school."

"To keep a school!" The child drew a deep breath as if the idea had almost overwhelmed her. "You don't look like a school-mistress. I don't think you can be one."

They must be old, and ugly, and cross, for I have seen two or three, and that's what they were all like. You are only making fun, arn't you?"

"Oh, no, Maggie; I am telling you the truth, and I daresay I shall grow ugly and old and cross enough some day. Perhaps keeping school helps to bring this state of things about, so I had better enjoy my holiday while it lasts. Suppose we have just a little quiet race—one that wouldn't frighten papa—to the strawberry bed yonder."

"Oh, yes, we will; but I want to say something first. If you are really going to keep a school, do ask papa to let me come to it; he was telling you just now I must learn. Why didn't you say then you were a schoolmistress, and could teach me?"

"Because, Maggie, I have reason to believe your papa knew it before-hand. Didn't you hear him say he disliked schools?"

"Oh, that can be only such schools and schoolmistresses as I dislike. I am sure he

would like you to teach me. I shall ask him, if you won't."

"No, dear child, I hope you will not. Your papa knows best what is right for you. Perhaps he will let you come to me some day if he is left to decide it himself. And now for our race and the strawberries."

Margaret, arriving first at the winning post, only a little flushed and not at all tired, began in a state of very pleasurable excitement to search for the fruit I had tempted her with, and I, throwing myself on the grass beside her, conscious at last that I had gone through enough physical exertion for one day, watched the small, dainty-looking creature dreamily, and felt some pity for the father who had probably laid all his earthly hopes at the shrine of this fragile idol, which a single adverse wind might hurl in a moment to the dust.

"I ought not to get impatient at this poor man's prosiness or heaviness," I had just thought, when a step, not quite familiar,

sounded on the lawn behind me, and I sprang up abruptly to confront the gentleman whom I had been paying the compliment to compassionate and meditate about.

"Margaret is quite safe, you see, and quite happy," I began in a tone that was intended to deprecate any fault finding on his part. "Were you afraid to trust her for this little time with me?"

"If I had been," he said, "I should not have suffered her out of my sight. I don't think you have been very prudent yourself in lying on the grass, so late in the evening. Perhaps you will show me the rest of the garden while Maggie is busy there; and then we must be going home."

The gravel paths of our quondam wilderness were very narrow, and did not admit of even two persons, however slim, walking in them side by side. So I preceded my solemn companion along several of these, some straight and others winding, till we came to an open space of uncut grass, ter-

minating in a sort of copse, at the end of which a gate led out into the Boltby Road.

"A wild place, even now, you see," I remarked, as my companion, when we had left the paths, came and walked beside me. "We have done as much in the way of clearing and beautifying as we could afford, and, for my part, I like nature in the rough."

"Not human nature, I hope?" said the vicar, interrogatively.

"I was not thinking of human nature, certainly," I replied; "but even that I would rather have rough than artificial—would not you?"

"Undoubtedly; but don't you think rough human nature capable of improvement by other than artificial means; don't you recognise its need of a divine element to purify and strengthen it for its human work and warfare? This is what I meant when I said I hoped your remark was limited to the inanimate nature we see around us."

"A sermon out of the pulpit, and for my

sole edification," I thought to myself, a little impatiently ; but I answered aloud. " Of course in a spiritual sense, I know that the roughness of our nature must be got rid of, but one cannot be always remembering this in our every day conversations. I am afraid, Mr. Wyke, you will find us a very benighted set of people at Graybourne."

Without noticing this last worse than foolish observation, my companion said, somewhat severely, I fancied— " Then am I to understand that you keep one class of thoughts and feelings for Sundays and another for week days, and that any allusion to spiritual things, except on the Sabbath, is an offence or a weariness to you ?"

" Oh dear, no," I replied quickly, and less than ever inclined to like this tiresome man, who had thought fit to preach to me out of season ; " I did not mean anything of the kind. I don't know indeed now, what I meant. Shall we return, and see how your little girl is getting on ?"

"I am in no hurry, if you are not, and I wanted to talk to you for a minute or two about your sister—your elder sister, I believe?"

"Yes," I said, in some astonishment; "I am the youngest, and inferior to dear Gertie in every way; you will be pleased with her, I am sure, Mr. Wyke."

"Has she a good temper?"

"A good temper!" I exclaimed, too much startled by this abrupt enquiry to avoid the bad taste of repeating the vicar's words, "Has anybody told you it is otherwise?"

"No; except a casual remark from one of the Miss Downings, and a sentence or two from your mother just now, your sister has never been mentioned to me. My question is perfectly independent of any previous information on the subject."

It was on my lips to say, "then, what concern is it of yours?" but I remembered the dignity of Mr. Wyke's office, and the reverence I was inclined, when he was in his

pulpit, to feel for the man himself; and so I answered, courteously—"My sister is very good, very conscientious, very self-denying on all important points; a dear, clever, affectionate girl, but she would tell you herself that her temper is a little hasty, and as you have given me no chance of evading a direct reply, I suppose, I must confess that I also think it is."

"And your own is the same?"

I fairly laughed aloud at this; it was so exceedingly irresistible. Was our new vicar thinking of establishing a confessional at Graybourne, and feeling his way to so strange an innovation by thus unceremoniously ransacking the consciences of his parishioners? I could hit upon no other elucidation of the mystery of his present proceedings, and when I had had my laugh out, I said—

"I believe I must petition for a little time to reflect on this last home question of yours, Mr. Wyke. The fact is, I have the credit amongst my own people of being a sort of

angel as to temper—milk and honey, you know, and all that kind of thing—but your very straightforward enquiry, implying as it seems to do, a different opinion, has taken conscience by surprise ; and she is really not prepared with an answer. How long can you give me for self-examination ?”

“ I am not jesting, Miss Beamish,” said the vicar, in a tone that was almost as sad as it was disapproving, “ but if such a question as I have ventured upon, made in a serious spirit, would be offensive to you, even from a man nearly old enough to be your father, and a minister of religion, I am willing to withdraw it. We will return to my little girl, if you please.”

Could anything be more tiresome and worrying than to be thus completely misunderstood ? How was I to deal with a man who had not an atom of mirth or fun, or appreciation of these refreshing things, in his whole nature ? I had just made up my mind to assure him emphatically that I had never

been offended at truth and sincerity in my life, and that I was rather flattered than otherwise at his expressing an interest in my temper, when voices in the road, from which a high wall only divided us, reached our ears, and instantly claimed my attention in consequence of the strange effect one of these (which I had at once recognized as Meta's) seemed to produce on the vicar.

We were standing at the moment very near to the iron gate I have before mentioned, and scarcely had I noticed my companion's start and look of perplexity (as the voice which had evidently excited them arose on the still evening air), when Mrs. Arnott and Meta Kauffman came into view, walking leisurely in the middle of the elm-bordered road that we were now looking upon.

Neither of the ladies happened to turn towards the gate as they passed, and so I did not speak. I was intently occupied with the conjectures this new incident had suggested, and

wondering whether Mr. Wyke would make any voluntary observation.

As he remained apparently buried in profound thought, I said presently, and as if I had noticed nothing—

“My cousin has been spending the day at Primrose Cottage. It is kind of Mrs. Arnott to see her safely home. If I had brought the key of the gate here I might have spared them a round of a quarter of a mile, but perhaps they would not have thanked me, as they seemed to be in very deep and interesting conversation. Meta has taken a strange fancy to the gay young widow.”

“I did not know it was your cousin who just passed us,” replied the vicar, appearing to emerge with some difficulty from his musing fit. “Miss Kauffman, I believe you called her the day I first saw you all. It is likely enough that two German voices should resemble each other. I was startled at the instant by the odd similarity of your cousin’s

voice to one I heard, under rather painful circumstances, in Germany, some time ago. Voices always impress me more than faces—though I believe I should anywhere recognise the face belonging to that voice. It was a very uncommon one.”

“And probably quite unlike my cousin Meta’s,” I said, mischievously, being quite positive that Mr. Wyke had never yet given a single straightforward glance into any of our countenances.

At this remark of mine, all the vicar’s habitual shyness, which had been laid aside for that evening, returned as if by magic, and he said, with the air of a bashful schoolboy :

“I don’t think I am much given to examine young ladies’ faces. I am sure if Miss Kauffman and a perfect stranger were brought at this moment before me I should not know one from the other ; but, as you say” (had I said it?) “the fact of voices being alike forms no reason why faces should be so. I am afraid, Miss Beamish, I have been keeping you out

too long, and Margaret ought to have been at home an hour ago. I will pick her up on my way, and go now and bid your mother good evening."

When we reached the house, Meta had arrived, but was up-stairs taking off her bonnet, and as the vicar insisted on making a hasty retreat, there was no meeting between them that night.

I consoled myself, and hushed my ardent curiosity on the subject to sleep by the reflection that there would be speedy and abundant opportunities for bringing them together.

CHAPTER XL.

META'S ANNOUNCEMENT.

META did not tell us much about her visit to Primrose Cottage. She only said, in a general way, that she had enjoyed it very well, and that Mrs. Arnott had asked her to go again early in the following week. It struck me that during the next few days there was a little cloud over the usually bright spirits of this impenetrable cousin of mine, and more than once I was on the point of asking her if anything had gone wrong with her; but increasing acquaintance with Meta was confirming me in a belief I had very early im-

bibed, that she had a singular dislike to being questioned about herself in any way. So I let her alone for the present, watching her certainly with ever growing interest and curiosity, but secure in my firm persuasion that long before Guy could meet her again, I should have fathomed the mysteries connected with her past life, and amidst the shadows of which she still appeared to be occasionally walking.

When the Sunday came—the Sunday after Mr. Wyke's visit to Lindenhurst—Meta excused herself from accompanying us to church. This was not a very unusual thing with her, though to please my mother I believe she often went when she had no inclination to do so; but on the present occasion, as she did not complain of feeling unwell, I ventured to remonstrate a little, and to say I thought she was wrong to absent herself from a place of worship, simply because she felt no especial interest in going.

“Has Mr. Wyke made a saint of you al-

ready, Ethel?" she replied, with her thoroughly good-tempered, sunny laugh. "He must be a wonder to have done so much in a single private interview ; but have some mercy upon the poor sinners who have been less highly privileged than yourself. I have only listened to his eloquence in public, you know."

"Meta, I am no saint," I said in answer to her jesting, which in anybody else would have appeared ill-timed and ungraceful ; "but I cannot bear to see people staying away from church for nothing. It is a bad example, to say the least of it ; and schoolmistresses, I think, ought to be patterns of all that is good."

I added this last clause jokingly, of course, and because I fancied Meta was beginning to weary of my importunity. She coloured slightly, and replied in a graver voice:—

"So they ought, Ethel, and therefore I fear I shall never be fit for one ; but you are not dressed yet, and the bells have been ringing these ten minutes."

I left her then, and saw no more of her

till we returned from church at one o'clock. That was our dinner hour on Sundays, and on this occasion we had brought home Alicia Clarkson to spend the afternoon with us. Mrs. Hallam had seen me shaking hands with her in the porch, and had said with her usual bluntness :

“ You may borrow Alicia for a few hours, if you want her. I am going to pay a round of formal visits which would tire the poor child to death. About five I will either send or call for her.”

So Alicia had gladly availed herself of this unlooked-for leave of absence ; and she and I, meeting so rarely, and having always been greatly inclined to like each other, had a hundred things to talk about, that for the time, drove Meta and her singularities entirely out of my thoughts.

At dinner, however, I could not help noticing that she was unusually preoccupied and inattentive to what was passing around her. Except when gazing at Alicia, or

listening to what she might be saying (and Alicia spoke very little), Meta appeared wholly wrapped up in her own meditations.

"You are not well, my love," my mother said to her once, with quite the same tender anxiety she would have manifested in addressing either of her own girls (could Guy's future wife be less to her than his sisters?) "You should have gone out into the air this beautiful morning."

"I am perfectly well," Meta replied, with that soft smile of hers, which was in itself a complete thank offering, "and I *have* been into the air while you good folks were at church. I walked as far as Primrose Cottage."

"As far as Primrose Cottage," repeated mamma in astonishment, "And with what possible object; surely not to call during church time on Mrs. Arnott?"

"Well, yes it was," Meta answered, with half a laugh and half a blush; "She told me the other day she should be at home

this morning, and I wanted to speak to her particularly."

My mother seemed waiting for and expecting some further explanation, but as none came she allowed the subject to drop, and talked, during the remainder of the time we remained at table, to Alicia Clarkson.

In leaving the dining-room I invited Alicia to come with me into the garden, and we found a deliciously shady spot under some thick lime trees where we sat down and enjoyed thoroughly the long, breezy summer afternoon.

I asked my companion, amongst other things, of her former acquaintance with our vicar, and she told me she had lived as governess in a family he was connected with through his late wife, and where he visited constantly when in London.

Very warmly Alicia spoke of the general excellence and purity of his character; very gratefully and even affectionately of the kindness she had herself received from him;

but there was no embarrassment in her manner, no faltering or consciousness in her voice; just so she might have spoken of a father or an elder brother; and I smiled as I remembered how some of us had destined this sweet Alicia to be the grave Vicar's second wife, and wondered whether he was aware of the very calm nature of her sentiments towards him.

After this I ventured (as girls will venture when they are alone together) on more delicate ground, and spoke to Mrs. Hallam's companion of Mrs. Hallam's son. It was quite a different matter now. At first, like Coleridge's heroine,

"She listened with a flitting blush,
"A downcast eye, a modest grace;

but as I went on and grew bolder in my surmises and assumptions, Alicia became very grave and pale, and said at last, putting her little trembling hand into mine—probably that I might not think it was any lack of

confidence in me that dictated her words—
she was such a tender-hearted creature—

“ Dear Ethel, let us talk of something else. You must know, in spite of all you say, that Edmund Hallam would never dare, even if he were inclined, to choose a girl like myself for his wife. Have you not heard, that in consequence of the death of a distant cousin, he is next heir to an earldom; and Lord Clinton is now a very old man.”

“ No, I never heard this, Alicia, but I cannot see that it would make much difference in people’s feelings; however, I will not utter another word to agitate or vex you, dear. I suppose Edmund will soon be coming to Beechwood again.”

“ Almost immediately,” she said, and the colour went and came so rapidly on her cheek as she spoke, that I could no longer be in the slightest doubt as to *her* feelings at any rate. “ Almost immediately, and I believe Mrs. Hallam is going to give a very grand fete on his birthday, which will occur next month.

She talks of having an out-of-door entertainment, and if so, all the Graybourne people will be invited. That will be nice, Ethel, for of course you and Gertrude will come."

"Yes, if our school duties have not commenced. For my part I shall like it excessively ; we have so little change here, and it would doubtless be a great treat to our cousin Meta. What do you think of Meta, Alicia?"

"I think she is wonderfully attractive, and, at times, very, very pretty, but I don't fancy I could feel at home with her. She is not like an English girl."

"Oh no, but you should hear her sing, and by the bye, how does your own singing get on? Are you still taking lessons?"

"Yes, but I have really so little voice" (here she sighed in a manner that I thought wholly disproportioned to the occasion), "that it seems a pity to spend the money on me. I tell Mrs. Hallam so continually, but she only laughs and bids me persevere."

"She is passionately fond of music herself, is she not?"

"Yes—all the Hallams are—of singing especially.—And so Miss Kauffman has a beautiful voice?"

"Very beautiful, and very peculiar. You think her attractive now. When you have heard her sing you will feel that you never discovered her fascination till that moment. She is a remarkable person altogether, I assure you."

"You like her very much?"

"A simple question, Alicia, and one that, after all I have said about my cousin, ought to be easy to answer; and yet it really is not. I am charmed by Meta certainly; I find her society delightful; I miss her if she is only absent for a day—and yet, inasmuch as I do not in the least understand her, I don't think I can venture to affirm that I thoroughly and entirely like her."

"Strange! but I am sure I should feel as you do with regard to anybody I failed to

comprehend. Where we give our affection it is so desirable to be able to give our perfect esteem."


"Oh, I think so too—what could be more torturing than to love and doubt, or having loved, we will say, to preserve that sentiment when the esteem which first inspired it had vanished for ever? I suppose this does happen sometimes, Alicia?"

Alicia pondered a little, and then decided that it might, but that it would be very, very terrible. And after this we grew more and more romantic and young-womanish in our harmless talk (for the soft summer air was strangely provocative that summer's eve of tender thoughts and impressions), and I don't know what we should have come to, had not Meta suddenly appeared upon the scene, and put an end to our pleasant dreams and imaginings.

She might not have done this had she joined us with no other purpose than that of mingling in our idle gossip, for Meta was—as I

judged her then—a hundred times more dreamy and romantic than either Alicia Clarkson or myself, and would no doubt have guided us into the very centre of that wondrous dream-land whose threshold we simple English girls could barely touch with our timid feet—but she had come to us with the plain practical object of imparting to me a communication which, for some reason or other, she preferred that I should listen to in company.

“Ethel,” she commenced, rather abruptly, and declining to sit down, in favour of a leaning posture against the trunk of a tree which shaded Alicia and myself, “I have been explaining to Mrs. Beamish why I went to Primrose Cottage this morning, and now I wish to give the same confidence to you. Through Mrs. Arnott I have heard of a situation in a private family which I think it will be very desirable for me to accept. In fact,” she continued, meeting for an instant my look of blank surprise, and probably deeming it best to avert at once all chance of opposition,



"I have only to see the lady as a mere form, and then the matter will be settled."

I believe I was rude enough to continue to look at her, when she had done speaking, for more than a minute—the suddenness of the thing so entirely bewildered me, but presently words came of themselves, and I expressed, in tolerably strong terms, the utter astonishment with which this singular communication had filled me.

Alicia rose then and strolled away from us.

"I was prepared for some amount of disapproval on your part," Meta said gently, and almost humbly, now we were alone—"and therefore I would not mention it till the thing was done. Forgive me, Ethel, for having thought more of my own interest on this occasion than yours. I should not have liked the monotony of a school, and at the best it would have been long before I could have made much money as your assistant. Here, at Mrs. Vivian's, I shall have eighty guineas a year, and be treated as one of the family."

"At Mrs. Vivian's, of Fell House—is it there you are going, Meta?"

"Yes, her last governess was a cousin of Mrs. Arnott's. She is leaving to be married, and Mrs. Arnott spoke for me. They wanted some one who would teach German and singing well. I suppose I can do as much as that, Ethel."

I was beginning to see that Meta had a right to choose her own position, and to do the best she could for herself.

"Assuredly you can," I replied in a more cordial voice, "and I am glad so excellent a thing has fallen in your way. Had Gertrude been at home I should never have dreamt of objecting to it, but I must say I think you should have waited her coming—she had a right to be consulted as it was at her suggestion chiefly that you were invited to England, and she is or will be the head of the concern you came to make part of. I cannot bear to have anybody put a slight upon dear Gertie."

"You forget," pleaded Meta, still very

humbly and apologetically, "that Mrs. Vivian was not likely to wait my pleasure in the matter. She required an answer at once, as far as my willingness to go to her was concerned, and I must either have lost the situation or accepted it without delay."

"Well, then, we must just make the best of it, I suppose, and, for one thing you, must write to Gertrude yourself, Meta, and tell your own story. I daresay you can win with your pen as easily as with your tongue. By-the-bye, what does mamma say to it all?"

"She is sorry, I am sure, but will not seek to influence me in any way. She thinks I could scarcely refuse the offer of eighty guineas a-year."

"It is tempting, certainly; and the Vivians, I imagine, are nice people. I only hope Gertie will not be disappointed."

"How much you think of your sister, Ethel. Are you afraid of her?"

"Afraid of my darling Gertie?" I exclaimed, indignantly. "Why, Meta, what

could have put such a wild idea into your head; are you serious in asking me the question?"

"Yes—quite serious, and it occurred to me, I suppose, because I am conscious of being afraid of her myself."

"You, Meta, and without having seen her. Surely you are talking nonsense now?"

"I am not, indeed. You all speak of Gertrude as if she were a person to be looked up to, and feared; a person of quick and decisive judgments, and who would have little mercy upon the faults and weaknesses of those around her. Ethel, I like you, and dear Mrs. Beamish, and poor Guy very sincerely. I could live with you happily for ever—but I am quite sure I should not love your sister; and so it is best for us not to attempt an every-day life together."

"And is this, then, the reason you are leaving us, Meta?" I asked somewhat coldly; for her strange opinion of Gertrude had wounded and distressed me.

“Oh, not entirely,” she replied, quickly; “and what I have said on that subject is to you alone. Had you not better join Miss Clarkson again now, and I have promised to go and make tea for Mrs. Beamish. We will send for you and your guest when it is ready. Shake hands, Ethel, won’t you ?”

I shook her hand lightly, and she turned without another word, and went back into the house.

CHAPTER XII.

FRIGHTENED.

MRS. VIVIAN, of Fell House, called the next day and had a long interview with my mother on the subject of Meta and her qualifications. I do not know all that passed between them, but mamma must have spoken very warmly and approvingly of the girl whom she expected one day to claim as a third daughter, for Mrs. Vivian, in leaving, declared herself more than satisfied, and expressed a hope that as her old governess was obliged to go to London that week to make preparations for her marriage, Miss

Kauffman would be able to take up her residence at Fell House the week after.

It was purely by accident, I know, but it did seem odd that the day finally determined on for Meta's leaving our roof, was the one immediately preceding that on which dear Gertrude was to return home.

"But I shall often come and see you all," said Meta cheerfully—she had been particularly cheerful since the whole matter of her going to the Vivians was settled. "I know I shall not be required to have the children with me much more than half the day, and the distance, after all, is a mere nothing."

"Four miles, at least," my mother said, "and that is rather too far for you to walk, my child, with your delicate health. Pray think of yourself, Meta, and never attempt anything rash on our account."

Meta laughed and kissed the anxious speaker with every appearance of the most grateful affection. Perhaps I wronged her when I

thought to myself that mamma's fears of her doing anything rash for our sakes were entirely groundless.

Poor dear mamma! she was terribly divided both in her opinion and feelings concerning this new plan of Meta's. In some respects she considered it a good thing and rejoiced that so eligible a position had been offered to our young relative; but then again she feared Guy would see it in a different light, and make himself unhappy at the thought of the possible trials and probable temptations to which Meta might, as a governess in a fashionable family, be exposed.

At length she found courage to write and tell him of it, and his answer, which came by return of post, did not tend to quiet her mind on the subject. He was deeply grieved and distressed at the news she had given him; feared Meta had not been happy at Lindenhurst; implored both mamma and myself to do our utmost to dissuade her from the plan, and ended by declaring he should

have no peace till he heard the whole thing was abandoned.

With this heart-rending letter—it was really so to the loving mother—mamma sought Meta, and asked her if her determination to leave us was irrevocable—if poor Guy's passionate and absolute disapproval of her quitting Lindenhurst could not move her to stay, at least till he came home again. I happened to walk into the room where they were, just as my mother had got so far in her errand, and was waiting almost breathlessly for Meta's reply.

The girl seemed to ponder a minute or two; (I don't believe she wavered for a single instant about her own plans, although there was this appearance of doing so); then she looked up into my mother's face with her sweetest and most caressing smile, and said softly,

“Dear Mrs. Beamish—I will write to Guy, and you will see that his next letter to you will be very different.”

And so it was, though what arguments or arts she used to induce him to retract all his previous objections, and view the matter as she viewed it, I am quite incapable of saying. At any rate the thing was done. Guy was content; his mother was content; I was content; and Gertrude, though astonished, took it all very philosophically, writing five lines on the subject of Meta's decision, and five pages on the subject of the monster examination for rewards and prizes which was to come off at Parnassus House on the following day.

Meta had very few preparations to make in connection with her change of abode. She had brought an extensive wardrobe with her, and had hitherto had no opportunity of displaying anything but the simplest toilette. But at Fell House it would be very different. The Vivians were gay people, visited and received all the best county families, and had, besides, constant guests from London or elsewhere staying in the house. Mrs. Arnott had

assured Meta that her voice alone would secure her admittance and welcome amongst all these people, but that independently of any special gifts or attractions, the "governess" in the Vivian family was quite an honoured and privileged individual.

"So there's no fear, you see, of my not getting on comfortably with them," Meta said to me one day, as we were discussing the future. "In going out as governess, the only apprehension I could ever experience would be that of having my claims as a gentleman overlooked. Pride is one of my chief weaknesses, Ethel, and when that is trampled on, I can become very fierce indeed."

"Most women can, I think, unless they are saints or angels," I replied shortly, for though Meta alluded to her pride as a weakness, her manner implied that she really viewed it as a meritorious quality, and one which she was singular in possessing. "I don't suppose you are either worse or better than your neighbours in this respect."

“Ah, you don’t know me yet, Ethel,” Meta laughed, good-humouredly, “and now that Gertrude will not be able to study me too, perhaps you never may. I don’t think I could have stood the fire of a couple of model English girls, devoted heart and soul to each other, and full of amiable but strong British prejudice. We shall have more mutual love and faith at a distance, believe me, even if under Mr. Wyke’s teaching—public and private—you grow into one of the saints you just now spoke of.”

It was surely not surprising that my “strong British prejudice” revolted desperately against nearly every word of this curious address. I was not what is romantically called “a creature of impulse” in general, but it certainly was impulse which dictated my words now, as I said :

“Meta, you are right in asserting that I do not know you, that I probably never shall know you, for you seem to me encompassed by mysteries far too profound for so weak a

sight as mine to fathom. I claim no extraordinary penetration in having discovered that you and Mr. Wyke have met before, and that you are anxious to get out of his neighbourhood."

I was sorry when the words were spoken; very, very sorry. I had no intention of paining my cousin in that way. Her face, so joyous and almost defiant a moment before, grew suddenly white and elongated, with a pinched, unnatural expression, as if some of its youth had been abruptly torn, with the sunshine, out of it. With that countenance—which really frightened me—she stared into mine, half helplessly, half enquiringly, for a minute or two. Then, as I did not speak, she said in a thick, labouring voice:

"Has Mr. Wyke told you he ever met me before, Ethel?"

Understanding her fear, I hastened to reply—

"No; he has no idea of it. Only when he heard your voice the other evening, as you

passed the garden gate by which we were standing, he started and explained afterwards that it was like a voice he had heard, under painful circumstances, some years ago in Germany."

"This was all, quite all, he said, Ethel?"

"Quite all, Meta. He has not seen your face yet, you know."

She remained for several minutes buried in profound and evidently agitating thought, during which her face gradually resumed something of its natural expression. At the end of that time she met my eyes (I think they must have had a penitent if not a pitying look in them) unflinchingly, and said:

"Ethel, I will not burden your mind or conscience with the details of a secret that could avail me nothing to tell, nor you to hear. I will only ask you, as a special grace to me, to keep from everybody, even from Gertrude, your suspicion about Mr. Wyke. Thus far I may acknowledge. We *have* met before, and it was under painful circumstances,

but he knows nothing bad of me. Will you take my word for this, and will you give me the promise I have asked?"

"If I give it, Meta, it is because we are parting, and I should be distressed to occasion you any further pain. I am not fond of concealments or mysteries, and hitherto I have been accustomed to tell my sister everything."

"But you do promise?" said Meta, entreatingly, though I could detect some impatience, and a little contempt for my British scruples, both in look and tone. "Don't keep me in suspense, Ethel."

"I meant you to understand the promise as given. And now, we will talk of pleasanter things. Did mamma tell you that the Miss Downings and their niece are coming to tea to-night, expressly to say good-bye to you, and to hear you sing once more?"

"I am greatly flattered," Meta replied; but her thoughts were not with those excellent neighbours of ours, and I soon after made an excuse for leaving her to herself.

During the next few days, and these were the last of our being together, Meta's spirits drooped visibly, and I could see that she avoided, with the utmost care, every opportunity of another *tête-à-tête* with me. Mamma, who was very sorrowful herself, attributed Meta's dejection to her regret at leaving us, now that the parting was so near at hand ; but although I did not share her view of the matter (knowing, indeed, that it was far otherwise, and believing that Meta would say good-bye to us with no emotions but those of gladness), I made no attempt to undeceive the kind, warm heart, that would have been wounded cruelly in thinking as I thought.

Mrs. Arnott, to whom Meta owed her good fortune, came often to Lindenhurst from the time the matter was settled. Without in the smallest degree disliking this little woman—I knew her too superficially for that—her society wearied me, and made me think human nature a poorer thing than I was inclined at other seasons to do. Yet there was nothing really

bad or vicious in her—nothing that the most strait-laced moralist could lay hold of as a reason why she should be shunned or condemned; she was only intensely vain, intensely frivolous, intensely occupied about those small matters of personal adornment, personal conquest, and personal amusement generally, which, when made to form the entire staple of a grown-up woman's conversation, become to every thinking mind so utterly paltry and contemptible.

I don't know whether thinking people—people to whom thought is simply the natural exercise of a faculty that has been given them—have any right to despise their unthinking neighbours, or to say, “stand by, for my soul is larger than thine!” but they do it, I suppose, instinctively and unpremeditatedly, in the same way that a very tall man cannot help looking down upon the short one who happens to be walking by his side.

Mrs. Arnott was a pretty woman, and she was young, and tolerably rich, and free. In

her own estimation these manifold advantages placed her as much above a girl like myself with my own bread to earn, and a very moderate share of personal attractiveness, as the shining stars were above the humblest flowers on which they looked.

The idea of my despising her, therefore, would have appeared to this very happy little widow a fancy too ludicrous to be for a moment seriously entertained. Perhaps it was ; and yet somehow I never came in contact with her without feeling her mental dwarfishness, and thinking of a verse I had once read—

“ Little things on little wings,
Bear little souls to Heaven.”

I don't believe that Meta was particularly attached to Mrs. Arnott, although, outwardly, they were the fastest friends. In spite of a few surface points of resemblance, there was no real congeniality between the two ; and pretty women, it is said, never cordially like each other. I don't know how this may be ; I am inclined to set it down as one of the

cruel scandals that short-sighted men delight to circulate against the gentler sex ; but I do know that the widow of Primrose Cottage and my cousin Meta Kauffman were bound together by exceedingly brittle links, and that their friendship appeared to me, even then in its earliest and warmest stage, one of those which the simplest accident might dissolve for ever.

Still Meta liked, while she remained at Lindenhurst, to have Mrs. Arnott a good deal with her, and the widow, having no particular excitements or distractions on hand, was content enough to come and tell us all she knew about the Vivians of Fell House, and their gay doings.

Thus it was that neither my mother nor myself had much opportunity of talking quietly or alone with Meta at the last. She went away, on the morning appointed, in Mrs. Vivian's carriage, which that lady had kindly sent for her—went away tearless, even after my mother's tears and blessing, but not with-

out thanking us graciously and sweetly for all we had done for her, and reiterating her assurance that she meant to come very, very often, to see us.

CHAPTER XIII.

PROSPECTIVE GAIETY.

GERTRUDE came home, and we were all very happy. Even Meta could be but little missed in the new delight of my sister's presence. We had so much to talk about, so much to hear, and so much to tell ; small matters they were, truly, that we discussed so eagerly and untiringly, but all important to us at the time, because nothing of deeper or more vital interest had as yet arisen to ruffle the calm stream of our peaceful lives.

Walking together—we two sisters—in the quiet fields those lovely summer nights, how

many a serene and softly-tinted picture we drew of the future that lay before us—a future that had no ambitious hopes, no very lofty wishes, no romantic expectations of any kind surrounding it, but was just what the ordinary course of human events seemed to encourage us in anticipating as possible, probable, and almost inevitable, unless sickness or death came amongst us and changed all things in the outer world.

I remember dear Gertrude saying so often, though not, of course, always in the same words:—

“You and I were born to be workers, Ethel—it is a noble vocation; let us try to pursue it, not only conscientiously, but lovingly, not only for the bread it may win, but for the comfort and strength it must give to our own hearts and minds if we go steadily onwards. Above all, never let us suffer any sickly romance or sentiment—those follies which occupy the lives of more than half the girls and women we meet—to

come between us and our life's duties. It would be weak and ridiculous to begin our youth by making any vows of perpetual spinstership; but, for my part, I earnestly hope that what is called 'falling in love,' may be spared to us both as long as we have work to do; and I am especially thankful in the reflection that Graybourne offers no single temptation to any madness of the kind."

I never failed to assent when Gertrude—my eldest sister, you know—talked in this way; but I sometimes could not help smiling a little to myself, and wondering whether she had taken my place (after I left Parnassus House), under the shadow of Minerva, and there learnt so much of wisdom.

I smiled, perhaps, because her grave words sounded quaintly, coming from such pretty coral lips, and endorsed by the sober, stedfast look, which I thought even then could not be the only expression belonging to those long-fringed, violet eyes.

But we were very happy, and the bright

summer days went swiftly by, while we matured our plans in connection with the labours we were so soon to begin, and enjoyed the remnant of our holiday as thoroughly as if we were school-girls still.

Mr. Wyke called soon after my sister returned, and was introduced to her. She talked to him as she would have talked to anybody then of her labours and her triumphs at Parnassus House, and her hopes of being able, in the coming time, to make school life as happy to her own pupils as it had been to her. I felt sure that the simplicity of her character must charm and interest him, and I believe it did, for he came oftener to us than to any of his other neighbours—the poor always excepted — and seemed to grow more and more at home with us.

My little friend Maggie was a frequent guest at Lindenhurst, too—indeed, I am not sure that Maggie's fondness for the place had not something to do with the vicar's increasing sociability—and about a week before our

actual labours were to commence, he informed me (I cannot imagine why it should have been me, and not Gertrude), that if I did not think his little daughter would be too troublesome on account of her backwardness, he should like to send her to us every day for three or four hours.

Secretly, I could not help being rather flattered at this decision, knowing as I did the great prejudice he had always had against schools; but I only said, in my calmest manner, that I had no fear of Maggie being in the least troublesome, and that I should be very glad to have her.

"Thank you," he answered, somewhat cordially, and then, after an interval of silence, during which I could see the old spirit of bashfulness stealing on and taking entire possession of him, he added—

"And perhaps, as Maggie knows you better than your sister, and is fond of you, it will not interfere with your arrangements if I ask you just at first to be her teacher."

I said I should have much pleasure in keeping my little friend entirely to myself—and the anxious father seemed satisfied with this, and in going away shook my hand a trifle more warmly than he had ever yet done.

In the meanwhile we had seen nothing of Meta. One short note had reached us two days after her departure, in which she expressed herself charmed with her new home and new friends; but no allusion was made in it of coming to Lindenhurst, nor was Gertrude spoken of in any way. I resented this deeply for my sister, who only laughed, and said that some of us must have painted her in very hideous and terrifying colours to our German relative. For her part she was in no hurry for the introduction, even though mamma would remind her that Meta was one day to be our dear Guy's wife. Gertrude curled her pretty lip at every mention of our brother's infatuation, and declared her conviction that she could talk him out of it

in half an hour, when once she had him to herself again.

How strange it is that many really clever, thinking people, absolutely refuse to believe in the existence of feelings and passions of which they are incapable themselves.

At length there appeared a chance of Gertrude and Meta being introduced to each other, whether they cared for it or not.

Mrs. Hallam sent out invitations right and left to a monster fête, to be given in Beechwood Park, on the birthday of her son, who had been already for two or three weeks staying with his mother.

This great event, in prospective, naturally created immense excitement in quiet little Graybourne, and there was a fearful amount of running to and fro amongst the ladies to ascertain from their neighbours whether they had accepted the invitation, how they meant to go, what they thought of wearing, &c.

The Miss Downings and their niece were the first who came to us on this popular

errand, and it was not difficult to see that each of them, in her own peculiar way, was in a state of inward effervescence, that had it lasted long must have been highly detrimental to her general health.

Of course, Miss Downing, as an authoress, and a strong-minded woman, would have disdained to appear vulgarly interested in a matter of mere amusement, but she certainly entered into the all-important question of dress, as if she exceedingly enjoyed the idea of it; and Jane Norton, who, in her quiet, mouse-like way, had a wonderful faculty of observation, told me privately that Aunt Harriet was awfully excited at the thought that she might meet the editor of the "——shire Instructor," whom, in spite of the long correspondence between them and her frequent invitations to him, she had never yet been privileged to see in the flesh.

Miss Dora was in a very plaintive, sympathy-craving mood indeed. She had a thousand dark apprehensions that she might

wake up very ill on the eventful morning, or that she might be taken very ill on the road, or that she might be taken very ill even when there; but all this, which I am sure was genuine, did not hinder her from discussing the toilette question with singular animation, and even growing almost angry with the calm Harriet, when the latter said, that as they were "no longer young girls," she was of opinion that they ought to wear either sober grey or mouse-coloured dresses, with plain white bonnets and veils.

"You can wear what you like," decided Miss Dora, in the end, "but neither grey nor mouse-colour suits my complexion, so I shall certainly go, if, indeed, I can go at all" (and here came quite a heart-breaking little sigh), "in a pink muslin and a pale blue bonnet; and Jane, if she pleases, may be dressed exactly like me."

"Thank you, Auntie," Jane said, demurely, while Miss Downing looked distressed for her weaker-minded sister; "but as I have

a very pretty white dress, I think it would be a thousand pities to buy me another. The Miss Beamishes are both going to wear white, and so, if you don't mind, I will decide on wearing mine."

"Very wise of you, Jane, my dear," put in Miss Downing, approvingly. "Young people should always endeavour to combine simplicity with economy. And so you two," (turning towards Gertie and myself), "intend to appear in pure, classical white."

"We have nothing else to appear in," said Gertrude, "and money is too scarce to be spent in new dresses, when we have old ones that will do. If they happen to be classical, so much the better. I am sure I did not know it."

"What a dear, matter-of-fact girl you are!" exclaimed Miss Downing, enthusiastically. "I am afraid at your age I was not half so wise. But you are fresh from school, and hard, dry work. By and bye we shall have you coming out in a new character."

"Never in a sentimental one," rejoined Gertrude, with a little disdainful laugh. "I have a contempt for sentimentalists, Miss Downing; and what you call dry, hard work, will be my choice, no less than it will be my necessity, through life."

"Well, well," said the elder lady, whose studies, if they had taught her nothing else, had probably taught her some slight knowledge of human nature; "we will believe your assertions, my dear, until we have proof that you are made of flesh and blood like other mortals. In the meanwhile let us all hope that the fifteenth may turn out an auspicious day, and that each guest at Beechwood may have an opportunity of enjoying him or herself, after his or her peculiar notions."

Jane Norton, who was sitting a little apart with me, bit her lips hard to keep in a burst of laughter at her good aunt's expense. She whispered presently:

"There is no doubt that Aunt Harriet's

‘peculiar notions’ of enjoyment on the occasion would be a four or five hours’ *tête-à-tête* with *the editor*, under some greenwood tree; but it is not so sure that he will see things in the same light. I wish he might though—auntie is a good creature and ought to be made happy.”

“And what would be your peculiar notions of enjoyment on the same occasion?” I asked of this sharp young lady, who seemed to think it quite natural and correct to discuss the weaknesses of her elders.

“Oh,” said Jane, after a very brief pause for reflection, “I shall of course enjoy everything hugely from the moment I arrive till it is time to come away again; but if Mrs. Hallam has such a thing as a cat, my very peculiar delight would be to have that cat to nurse and play with, lying in some shady spot, hearing the delicious music floating around me, and seeing—while unnoticed myself—all the lovely dresses of the grand ladies who will be there.”

“Strange combination, Jane,” I replied, wondering at the mixture of child and woman in this girl’s nature. “A cat, delicious music, and the contemplation of lovely dresses. Why not ask leave to take your own tabby, that for once your idea of perfect enjoyment may be realized?”

“Oh, no,” she answered, laughing, “that would scarcely do. My own tabby is charming at home, but I like ‘something new,’ even in cats, and a cat accustomed to the luxuries of Beechwood would be an especially interesting study. I was about to ask you what you would consider the perfection of happiness, Miss Ethel? but there is Aunt Harriet making a movement to go.”

In the evening of that same day, Mrs. Arnott paid us a visit, entered at full length on a description of the very elaborate toilette she had ordered for herself from London for the fifteenth, and spent five minutes, perhaps, in asking and hearing from us what we were intending to wear.

Then she spoke of Meta, and told us that she had received a note from her the day before, that she appeared very busy and very happy, and was looking forward to the Beechwood entertainment as eagerly as we quiet Graybourne people were doing.

"Oh, and I must tell you," continued this lively little personage, who would have been, by-the-bye, a very unsafe recipient of a secret. "I must tell you what I suspect Mademoiselle Kauffman is up to now. There is a young man staying at Fell House who has actually arrived at the mature age of thirty without ever having fallen in love. My cousin used to tell me lots about him. I believe she half lost her heart to him herself, foolish girl! Well, he is there at present, Meta says, and one of the most enthusiastic admirers of her singing. Of course she will hear of his coldness and insensibility as regards the gentler sex, and equally, of course, she will make an inward vow to bring him to her feet. I know I should, were I in her place. What fun it

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must be to her, especially if he really should prove hard to win. I shouldn't mind backing Meta to any amount, if she goes into the affair heart and soul. Every man breathing is vulnerable in one point, and a clever woman will easily discover where his weakness lies."

I saw that my mother was getting seriously annoyed at hearing Meta spoken of in this light, flippant way, and that Gertrude's face was expressing unqualified disapprobation, not to say disgust, at the whole style of Mrs. Arnott's conversation. To me her present gossip was somewhat less wearying than her first dissertation on bonnets, shawls, and demi-trains; but I considered that we had had enough of it now, so I interrupted her flow of eloquence to ask what was the cold-hearted gentleman's name.

"Oh, didn't I introduce him to you properly?" she said, with increasing animation, believing, I suppose, that she had inspired immense interest in her new hero. "He re-

joices in the euphonious name of Walter Kenyon—much too pretty and romantic, I think, for a man who has no heart.”

“ Well, it is rather a pretty name,” I assented, finding that neither mamma nor Gertrude were disposed to speak, “ and what occupation does he pursue that is capable of filling his life, and keeping him from the vulgar amusement of falling in love ? ”

“ Oh, he paints, I believe, not for a livelihood, but for the simple love of art ; and he is a great reader, and knows something of everything under the sun, and goes in for all the cardinal virtues, with a few extra ones besides. I assure you I am wild to see this cold perfection myself, and don’t promise that I shan’t try to outdo Meta, if I get a chance.”

“ Do let me offer you a glass of wine, Mrs. Arnott,” said my mother, with a severe quietness that the dullest person must have understood. “ You have a long walk to Primrose Cottage, and you have taken nothing since you came in.”

The widow declined the proffered refreshment, but rose a few minutes after, and wished us all good night.

“Odious, odious little woman!” exclaimed Gertrude, as soon as we were alone. “If that is Meta’s bosom friend, I can only rejoice that our German cousin has found another home.”

My mother sighed, but refrained from any observation at all.

CHAPTER XIV.

BEGINNING OF THE FETE.

THE fifteenth arrived, and proved as bright and beautiful a day as the most desponding amongst us could have desired.

Up to the last moment Gertie and myself had hoped to prevail on our mother to accompany us to Beechwood, but she remained firm in her resolution to stay at home;—she had certainly not been in good spirits lately—and we, amongst the many friends who kindly offered to take us under their wing, selected the Misses Downing, and were at their house, as agreed upon, by eleven o'clock.

Jane Norton, looking very fresh and pretty in her white dress and new straw bonnet, flew down stairs to receive us.

"We are all ready," she exclaimed breathlessly, "and the carriage will be here in a minute or two. Aunt Harriet looks quite queen-like in her rich, sober-coloured dress, and Auntie Dora is a picture, only she will keep saying she is going to have a fainting fit, and I am sure she has swallowed enough sal volatile to choke her. It is really very piteous, and makes Aunt Harriet so dreadfully nervous. There, I declare that is the carriage rattling down the street, and now there will be another dose of ammonia. Oh, do, one of you, run up and persuade her that she is quite well, or we shan't get off to-day."

Accordingly I went up (as Gertie had a little head ache, and was glad to rest after our walk), and found the interesting invalid reclining, with half-shut eyes, in her elder sister's arms, while a servant standing by held two or three small bottles, besides some

smelling salts, and an emptied wine glass, in her great red hands.

“Oh, my dear Ethel, isn't this distressing and vexatious?” cried Miss Downing the moment I appeared, “only to think of our poor dear Dora being taken so ill at this very critical juncture; but she always said it would be so, and her prophetic words have come but too true. Whatever is to be done?”

“Is Miss Dora really faint?” I asked, observing that she had even more colour than usual, “or is this only a little nervous attack, do you think?”

“Oh,” said poor Miss Downing, despairingly. “I believe it is just the fear of being ill that is doing it all; and she has taken such a quantity of these abominable stimulants, not to mention a little very weak brandy-and-water, that I really dread their effect upon her. If it were not for you two girls and our Jane, I would not hesitate a moment on sending away the carriage, and staying quietly at home with her.”

At this alarming announcement, spoken in all sincerity, I am convinced, Miss Dora opened her languid eyes very wide indeed.

“My dearest Harriet” (in a faint voice), “I would not permit you to make such a sacrifice for the whole world. Give me only a little time—my poor heart is beating so violently—and I shall be ready to accompany you. Miss Ethel, I am so sorry to keep you waiting, but you see what a frail, helpless creature I am.”

“But you will only get worse,” I urged, “while you remain in this hot room, imagining that you are going to faint. The fresh air and the gentle motion of the carriage will brace your nerves in a few minutes, and you will feel all right by the time we arrive at the park gates. Indeed, Miss Dora, I never saw you look so well or so handsome in my life.”

This finished the matter. The invalid only begged for one more sip of chloric æther, and then, supported by her sister and the appa-

rently tired-out attendant, she descended the stairs, and to Jane's great delight, was safely packed in the carriage before she had time to anticipate any new evils in connection with herself.

Who could help feeling well on such an enchanting morning? Jane Norton, in the ecstasy of her enjoyment, fidgetted to such a degree—some people always fidget when they are unusually happy—that twice or thrice she was threatened with banishment to the seat outside, next to the driver.

"You had better not send me there," she said, with another spasmodic swaying to and fro of her restless little body, "or I may mistake that cherry-cheeked old man for my precious Catakins, whom I am longing to have to hug and squeeze just now. Oh, does anybody know whether there are cats at Beechwood, and, if so, whether it would be thought odd for me to go to the kitchen and ask to borrow a pussy for the day?"

"Do be quiet, Jane," commanded Miss

Downing, majestically, as she smoothed out her handsome silk dress, and looked as if her niece's childish nonsense had brought her rudely down from cloudland, or from some pleasant anticipations not wholly unconnected with a certain editor.

Miss Dora did not talk much ; but I could see that her nervousness was fast yielding to the bright and cheering influences of sunshine, pure air, and all the novelty in anticipation. As we drove into the park, followed, as well as preceded, by quantities of other vehicles, she was looking as tranquil and composed as any of us, and only less radiant and ecstatic than the young lady who coveted the loan of a cat as the sole thing wanting to raise her to the very pinnacle of bliss.

We were in very excellent time. I fancy country ladies generally manage to be that—and on descending from our carriage we were conducted, by a liveried servant, to a very grand tent near the house, and quite distinct, both on account of its size and decorations,

from the numerous smaller ones scattered here and there about the beautiful park.

This tent was the reception room for the day of the gracious lady of the fête. She sat (being too old to endure the fatigue of standing), on a raised seat at the farthest end, and her guests walked to her through alleys of the most exquisite flowers, which filled the air with a fragrance almost oppressive, from its intense and mingled sweetness. Immediately behind Mrs. Hallam stood her son, an elegant rather than handsome young man, of about seven or eight-and-twenty. Next to him, and looking shyly, but perfectly happy, was Alicia Clarkson, dressed very simply and becomingly, and seeming quite a recognized member of the family.

Each party as they arrived were received in this tent by Mrs. Hallam, introduced to her son, if not already known to him, and presented with a programme of the day's entertainments.

Our little party went through the pre-

scribed ceremony with, I trust, some credit to ourselves, and certainly to our entire satisfaction, for Mrs. Hallam said something kind and gracious to each of us; and to Gertrude, whom she had not seen for six months, she was condescending enough to present a sprig of white geranium, which she plucked with her own hands from a magnificent plant standing near her.

“You have grown a very pretty creature,” she said, without the least regard to my modest sister’s blushes, and lightly touching the fair cheek she was admiring with the pure white flower. “But don’t let this favouritism of nature convert you into a smiling, silly coquette, as it does so many pretty women. Try to keep both heart and mind free and unstained. Vanity defiles, as well as things with uglier names. Perhaps the old woman’s gift, though it is only a perishing flower, will remind you of her warning. Now pass on, my dear, and amuse yourself for a few hours all you can.”

For nearly an hour we five, who had come together, remained in company, wandering about the less crowded parts of the park, listening delightedly to the admirable music of the bands, peeping into the tastily decorated refreshment tents, and growing familiar, by slow degrees, with the utterly novel excitement of the whole thing.

Of course on poor Miss Dora's account—she was really weak and delicate, apart from her imaginary ailments—we were often obliged to sit down, and on one of these occasions, having chosen a seat that commanded a view of the middle avenue along which the carriages drove on entering the park, we saw the party from Fell House arrive.

There were Mr. and Mrs. Vivian and two of their younger children in the first carriage—Meta Kauffman with the eldest daughter, a girl of about fourteen, an old lady, and a young man, in the second. Meta was looking excessively animated and charming, dressed, as indeed she well knew how, to per-

fection, and talking (when we first discovered her) with apparent eagerness to the gentleman who was her *vis-à-vis*.

"That must be the person Mrs. Arnott was telling us about," I said to Gertrude, when she had taken what observation she could of Meta—"I forget his name."

"Walter Kenyon," replied my sister, whose memory both for names and dates was remarkable—"he has rather a pleasant countenance."

Then we had to listen to the various opinions of our chatty companions on the dress and appearance of some people who had passed close to our bench—and the Vivians and their suite became lost for the present in the general crowd.

It was not long after this, and when Jane Norton was growing manifestly tired of our aimless wanderings, that Alicia Clarkson, leaning on our vicar's arm, found us out, and declared we had been the objects of her search for at least a quarter of an hour.

"I wanted to tell you," she said, when Mr. Wyke had greeted us all kindly, "that several of the lower rooms of the house are thrown open for those who may get tired of remaining in the open air. There is the music room, and the billiard room, and a little room quite apart and solitary, with plenty of couches and easy chairs for the invalids. Miss Dora, you are beginning to look tired. Shall I show you this quiet retreat now?"

"It is certainly very tempting," replied Miss Dora, hesitatingly; "but perhaps I should never find my way out again, and it would be rather lonely to spend the whole day there by myself."

"But I will come with you, dear, of course," said the elder sister, "and I have no fear of ever losing my way. Only, what is to be done with these young ladies in the meanwhile?"

"I will provide for their safety and amusement too," said Alicia, laughing. "Perhaps Mr. Wyke will take them to the archery

ground, where there are some ladies playing ; or to have some refreshment while I am away with you. The little room I have told you of is also supplied with a refreshment table, so that you can get there anything you like in that way."

Thus we parted, and our benevolent vicar, looking however slightly overwhelmed at having three young ladies thrust upon him so abruptly, conducted us to the gayer part of the grounds, where archery and games of various kinds, and even some dancing (or a courageous attempt at it) were going on.

Here, too, we came upon several of our acquaintances, and one of our Graybourne matrons, the doctor's wife, who was standing with her husband as a looker on, got into conversation with Gertrude, and soon drew her away from us altogether—the pretence being to show her some mimic boat racing on the small lake, but the real object, I suspect, to increase her own importance by having so very pretty a girl by her side.

Amongst the dancers we soon made out the *petite* and gaily-attired figure of Mrs. Arnott. I knew by this time, that Mr. Wyke did, in truth, shrink (with almost a morbid dislike) from the flirting, silly little widow of Primrose cottage, and I therefore warned him quietly of her near neighbourhood, and of the probability of her discovering and joining us when the dance was over.

Without a word he moved quickly in an opposite direction, seeming to forget, for the moment, that Jane and myself were under his charge.

“Oh, how I should like to dance, or to try and shoot an arrow, or to do something,” whispered my young companion to me, as I watched, in secret amusement, the vicar’s retreating form. “Do you think, Miss Ethel, if anybody were to ask me, I might dance, though, of course,” she added, in a ludicrously desponding tone—“it is quite absurd to suppose that anybody will.”

Poor Jane was wholly unconscious that

these words were overheard by a tall, middle aged, and very respectable looking gentleman standing immediately behind us. In another minute he had come forward, and with a half smile on his grave face was addressing the now deeply blushing Jane.

"I have not danced for some years," he said, in a particularly agreeable voice—"and I am sure I shall be a most awkward partner ; but if, while waiting for a better, you will generously accept me, I shall feel very highly honoured, and we can join the quadrille that is now being formed."

Jane Norton's simple "Oh !"—as this courtly speech was concluded, was one of the most amusing and suggestive things I ever heard. The gentleman was evidently quite fascinated by it. He took her hand, and before the embarrassed girl could make a single appeal to me as to what she ought to do, he had led her to a place amongst the dancers, and I was left standing quite alone.

Not an agreeable position to be in,

considering that nearly all around me were total strangers, and that move in what direction I might I could not reach a quiet spot without passing through a dense crowd. Besides this, I felt I had scarcely a right to leave Jane entirely to her new friend, for, although he was a gentleman and no longer young, we did not even know his name, and the child, whose quaint simplicity had so strongly attracted him, was as ignorant of all the usages of society as the birds singing in the oaks and elms above our heads.

While I debated uneasily what I should do, and railed inwardly against Mr. Wyke for deserting us, the cause of this desertion suddenly espied me, and ran away from the gentleman she was flirting with, to shake my hand.

"Frightful, to think of your being alone and unprotected," she cried, when I had explained partially how matters stood. "That vicar is a bear—a monster—unfit for civilized society. You must accept me as a chaperone

for the present, and I will get rid of my devoted knight."

"By no means," I said eagerly, feeling that any solitariness would be preferable to Mrs. Arnott's volubility, exercised on my behalf alone. "If, however, you will just look after Jane Norton, who is dancing yonder with that tall man in black, I should be truly grateful to you; and I, in the meanwhile, will see if I cannot find my sister and Mrs. Luke."

"Certainly, certainly," she replied quickly, glancing in the direction I indicated. "I don't know the man a bit; who is he, I wonder! But I will claim his partner the moment the quadrille is over, and take every care of her till I see you, or some of her own people, again."

This was all I wanted, so with another hand-shaking we parted, and I turned towards the green slope which I believed Mrs. Luke and Gertie had descended in going to the lake. I was not fated, however, to be

delivered from my lonely and unprotected situation in that way.

A hand suddenly pressed my arm very lightly, as I stood looking, still rather hesitatingly, into the distance, and a voice pronounced my name in amusingly penitent accents.

“Miss Ethel, I am completely ashamed of myself. I don’t know what I could have been thinking of, to leave you so abruptly and selfishly. Can you forgive me?”

I laughed first, for it was quite impossible to help it, as I turned and saw our kind vicar’s rueful expression of countenance. Then I gave frank utterance to my next impulse, and said how very glad I was that he had come back to me; solitude, amidst such a motley crowd, was anything but refreshing or agreeable.

“I think I ought to do penance for my rudeness,” he continued, as I accepted his offered arm, “by confessing the weakness that led to it, or perhaps—for young ladies

are quick at most things—your penetration may already have given you a clue to it. If so, we need not waste our time in dwelling upon such a very foolish matter.”

But I had no intention of letting off my victim quite so easily. The chance of teasing, in an innocent way, a man like Mr. Wyke, was far too irresistible to be lightly relinquished.

“I have not much penetration,” I said, gravely, “but it certainly has occurred to me that you are a little bit afraid of Mrs. Arnott—of her fascinations, of course, I mean.”

The poor vicar stopped suddenly, as if a bullet had gone through him, and turning sharply round, with all his shyness for once frightened out of him, looked me full and steadily in the face. I could have taken an oath, had it been required of me, that it was the very first time he had ever done so.

“Miss Beamish, is that what you think of me? is that really the interpretation you have put upon my running away from the lady in

question? Pray speak frankly, now the subject has been broached, and above all" (he must have seen the quivering of my lips), "speak seriously."

His seriousness (though I was half angry with it for interfering with the amusement I had promised myself) put my levity to instant flight, and I answered soberly enough, to convince him I was speaking the truth:—

"No, indeed, Mr. Wyke, you must give me credit for understanding you a little better than this. I know that you only share my own distaste for the society of Mrs. Arnott. If it is a weakness, as you have called it, you see I have to plead guilty to the same. She tires and bores me inexpressibly."

"A very mild effect compared with that she produces on me," he said, looking relieved, however, at my explanation. "I cannot account for the shrinking I have from this young woman; her voice, her laugh, her style of talking, and in short, everything

about her, is strangely offensive to me—jars, in some mysterious manner, upon my nerves. It is not dislike; that I could combat with, and perhaps overcome; it is simply repulsion.”

I think he did not intend to confess so much, for the next moment he added, rather shyly,

“Circumstances have drawn this little secret from me on your behalf, Miss Ethel. I should not care to have it talked about.”

“It never will be by me,” I replied; and then feeling sure he would be glad to dismiss the subject, I dashed at once into another, and told him how Jane Norton had been taken from me, and the arrangement I had made with Mrs. Arnott to look after her at the end of the dance.

“I had forgotten,” he said, with the smile that came so rarely, but which made quite another man of this grave vicar of ours. “I had forgotten that I left two of my lambs to go astray; where should you like to walk now, Miss Ethel?”

"It is nice everywhere, with a companion," I answered, out of the growing buoyancy of my spirits, "but I suppose I ought to search for some of my acquaintances. I have not even fallen in with my cousin yet."

"And that reminds me," said Mr. Wyke, "that there will be an old friend of mine here, with whom I shall be glad to shake hands. He is staying with the Vivians, and they would be certain to bring him in their train to-day."

"Is his name Kenyon?" I asked, with some little interest in the question.

"Yes; do you know him too?"

"Only from the report of Mrs. Arnott, who certainly did not prepossess me in his favour."

"He is, or was, some years ago, a very good young man. This is, I am aware, a conventional phrase, and expresses quite different ideas to different people. I mean that he had right principles, and acted upon them; the world may have corrupted him

since then, as it does so many who begin well ; but I beg your pardon, Miss Ethel, for getting into a sermonising vein on a day like this. We have both, it seems, somebody to look for. What do you say to our penetrating into the interior of that magnificent tent yonder ? You may be glad of a little refreshment by the time we reach it."

I did not care particularly for refreshment just then, and I thought it would have been very agreeable to stroll about in the wooded part of the park, where the soft rustling of the trees, mingling with the distant music of the bands, made altogether such exquisite melody in the sweet summer air ; but my companion was just a good, wise, practical Christian man, with no doubt higher views and wider aims in life than any that as yet had been even in thought revealed to me ; he was not a dreamer, or even an impassioned lover of nature for its own sake, and had I claimed his sympathy with even the least wild and girlish of the ideas that (suggested

by the subtle influences of summer, sunshine, and music, such as I had rarely before listened to) were dancing in a sort of rapture through my brain, I should probably have been as one speaking in an unknown tongue to him. At any rate, I believed so, and therefore, in answer to his last proposal, I said readily :—

“ Yes, we will go first into the tent, and perhaps some of our acquaintances whom we wish to find may be there.”

Mr. Wyke, notwithstanding his tall figure and steady purpose, had a difficulty in making a pathway for me, between the crowd thronging the tent, towards the long centre table. Those who had finished eating and drinking themselves, were either waiting on their companions, or chatting in parties behind the eaters. There was evidently a very strong attraction beginning to be felt towards the repository of so many tempting creature comforts; and the nearly breathless vicar turned with a smile, when at length he had

succeeded in winning for me a very narrow space by the table, and said:—

“I would that my exertions in your favour, Miss Ethel, had been with a nobler object in view than the attainment of a glass of wine and a sandwich; but, at any rate, let the success which has crowned these efforts, encourage you to apply to me should you ever need my services in a more important matter.”

What a courteous and gallant speech from the bashful and reserved vicar of Graybourne! I was actually conscious of a blush, both of surprise and gratitude, as I said—“thank you,” no less for those pretty words, than for the wine and sandwich he was handing to me.

The next moment, raising my eyes with no definite object, for hitherto every face I had seen in the tent was strange to me, I was startled out of all merely personal reflections by discovering (on the opposite side of the table—only lower down)—Meta, and the young man who had been talking with such

apparent earnestness to her in the Vivians' carriage.

Thought is very rapid, and often quite irrespective of any previous preparation of the mind in connection with the subject which may abruptly claim its attention. My thought at that instant was—"Mr. Wyke will see and recognize Meta now, and the mystery surrounding her will be made clear, and my conscience will be relieved of an oppressive secret, and Guy will probably be delivered from a thralldom that is injuring both himself and his future prospects."

My promise to Meta almost bound me, I believed, to refrain from hastening her exposure—if exposure it would be—of my own free will; and, therefore, I would not say to Mr. Wyke—"there is my cousin—look at her, and see if the face matches the voice which sounded familiar to you some few weeks ago." This would have appeared like treachery; and besides, the spell that Meta Kauffman had woven around me was not

quite broken yet. So I only said—in giving back my glass and plate :—

“ I have discovered a friend I wish to speak to, and should like to get, if possible, to the other side of the table. Shall we try ? ”

“ Certainly. ”

And once more the tall figure and the strong arm went before me in the jostling crowd, till, gently touching the arm of my brave pioneer, I warned him that my object was attained.

Meta and her cavalier—a most attentive and assiduous one he seemed to be—stood with their backs to us, eating and drinking, and talking together merrily. Mr. Wyke had not yet heard her voice—she was speaking low to-day, and much less than her companion. Should I break in upon the pleasure they were both so evidently enjoying—should I bring to her face, in lieu of the bright, beaming look I had just seen there, that terrified, scared expression I so well remembered ?

Whatever she had done, was I to be her judge or her avenger?

No. I was happy myself to-day—very happy—and this was enough to deter me from spoiling another's happiness.

"Let us get on," I whispered, to my kind protector, who seemed strangely unobservant of all that was passing around him. "There would be no chance of saying half a dozen words to anybody in such a crowd; and the heat is making me feel sick."

But before either of us could move a step farther, Meta turned abruptly from the table—perhaps at the sound of my voice, perhaps by an impulse of her own.

"Ethel!" as our eyes met, "how glad I am to have found you at last."

"Meta, Mr. Wyke is close to us."

It was more, I think, the sudden dread of "a scene" than any kindlier feeling, that prompted me to whisper those hurried words. In moments of great emergency I don't be-

lieve people in general are much actuated by any unselfish motives—these may come when there has been time for reflection, but instinct and impulse are both rather personal than relative, as all faithful searchers into their own hearts may discover if they like.

As I spoke my warning Meta's face flushed to the deepest crimson, and her eyes, with that terrified look in them again, went in the very direction I would have kept them from taking. Mr. Wyke, who had been quietly elbowing me a pathway towards the door—wholly unconscious of what was going on so close to him—turned just then with a smile of encouragement that I might proceed. Something in my face, I suppose, a little mystified him, for he suddenly looked away from me and towards my cousin, standing immediately behind me.

I thought it was all over; I had even worked myself up to believe I should hear poor Meta scream or see her faint, when, to my infinite relief, the young man, whose pre-

sence I had forgotten, moved accidentally just enough in front of my cousin to hide her face from the vicar, and at the same moment to reveal his own.

“Walter Kenyon!” exclaimed Mr. Wyke, in accents of unmistakeable pleasure, “I scarcely hoped my chief object in coming here to-day would have been so soon accomplished. You must spare me half-an-hour of your time when I have delivered this young lady safely into the custody of her friends.”

CHAPTER XV.

SUNSHINE AT BEECHWOOD.

WELL, I certainly had not anticipated being disposed of in quite so summary a manner. Our good vicar's words brought me down to a much lower level than the one I had been occupying for the last quarter of an hour. I was simply a young lady whom it would be a relief at the first convenient moment to "deliver into the custody of her friends." What else, indeed, could I think myself? Was it likely that, to a man of Mr. Wyke's age and character, I could prove so agreeable and congenial a companion as the ac-

complished and intellectual individual of whom our vicar had just testified that he had right principles and acted upon them. Certainly not; the thing was as clear as noonday, and yet I believe I must date from that moment a feeling that I cannot name dislike, or distrust, or even actual prejudice, but which was as strong and real as if composed of all these emotions, and which sprang up in my mind then and there against Mr. Walter Kenyon.

Most unreasonable and absurd of course it was, as nearly all sudden prejudices or prepossessions are, and I say this frankly now lest any idea may be entertained that I am setting up for one of those wise ones who have mysterious intuitions concerning persons and events which, according to their own belief at least, never fail of coming true. I knew, even then, that there was no sort of dependence to be placed on any intuition of mine, and that Walter Kenyon was quite as likely to develop into a saint or a hero, hav-

ing unconsciously inspired animosity in me, as if my warmest feelings had been arrayed in his favour.

At present I had not even the opportunity of bestowing a second glance upon him, for Mr. Wyke, having announced his intention of seeking his friend again in the same spot where he had found him, the moment he had got rid of me, moved on more energetically than ever, and compelled the loungers on all sides of us to make room for me to follow him till we arrived at a free, open space, at a short distance from the crowded tent, when he silently offered me his arm.

I had time now to think of Meta, and to ask myself whether I was really glad or sorry at the escape she had once more had. At the moment, it had certainly been an immense relief to me, but that was partly because I felt happy myself, and partly because I feared any public demonstration of her annoyance at the meeting she had evidently some mysterious reason for shrinking from. But this

mystery was becoming increasingly repugnant to my mind, and I felt sure that on each occasion of its being forced upon my attention I should be more and more bewildered as to my own duty in the matter, Guy's happiness and honour being involved in the question of this girl's worthiness.

From some half depressing and half impatient thoughts on this weary subject, I was roused by my companion exclaiming abruptly :

"Miss Ethel, where are we going? What friends shall I take you to? I had forgotten with what object I was mercilessly obliging you to walk so fast."

"And I was quite unconscious that we were walking fast. I had better look for the Miss Downings in the little room Alicia spoke about; we are not far from the house now."

"Very well; but I need not exhaust your strength in getting you there. Mr. Walter may well exercise patience for half-an-hour or so; it is more than three years since we

have met. He looks older, but is otherwise not altered externally. I hope the world he has been living in—I mean the gay, unthinking world—has not left its poisoned breath upon his moral nature. Walter Kenyon was not meant to be a trifle or a fool.”

“Oh, I understand he is anything but a fool,” I observed hastily, though I believed the vicar was rather thinking aloud than talking to me. “Mrs. Arnott spoke of him as highly intellectual and generally accomplished—it is this, I imagine, which makes him such a favourite in society. Intelligent young men are said to be somewhat rare.”

“I did not mean a fool in that sense,” the vicar very quietly replied. “I am apt to estimate folly as Solomon did so many centuries ago. Don’t you know that the most profound knowledge does not always include even the smallest amount of wisdom, and that wisdom—this wisdom I am speaking of—may exist in conjunction with an ignorance denser than you can probably form an idea of?”

Not being quite clear as to whether the vicar threw out these observations in his clerical character indifferent as to who might be his listener, or whether he put them in the form of a question to which he meant me to reply, I preferred remaining silent for a few minutes after he had spoken, and as he did not press the matter I concluded that my first suggestion had been correct.

“Mr. Kenyon must have been glad to recognize an old friend so unexpectedly;” I said, when a sufficient interval had elapsed for my companion to have discovered that I did not care for being ‘preached to’ to-day. “I suppose he was not aware of your appointment to the living of Graybourne?”

“Possibly not, or he would have come to see me—if at least he is still the Walter Kenyon I knew three years ago—but three years in the life of a young man may work wondrous changes, especially if his pathway has had few thorns or brambles laid across it—

and you said, I believe, that he was a favourite in society."

"I quoted Mrs. Arnott on the subject. I know less than nothing of this gentleman myself."

"And are a little tired of talking about him?" said the vicar, with a sudden penetration into my secret feelings that I should never have given him credit for—"well, Miss Ethel, I have once more to beg your pardon for having been both selfish and thoughtless as regards the young lady I ought to have made it a point of duty to entertain. You see I have really no business in gay scenes like this. I have not even the excuse of youth for being here at all."

"Yet," I answered, really thinking at that moment that the good vicar was talking nonsense, "there are many who must be nearly double your age here this morning, and who appear to be enjoying themselves excessively. I see no reason why people of any age may not innocently enjoy all that has been pro-

vided for our entertainment at Beechwood to-day."

"I am sure," Mr. Wyke said, with a benignant smile—for I turned to look at him as he spoke—"that if they can enjoy it at all, they can do so innocently. I am not quite a fanatic, Miss Ethel, though I think you are inclined to regard me as such."

How did he know—this man who never seemed to see anything beyond the ground his feet rested on—in what light I regarded him? and why, if he did not consider the scenes we were mingling in wrong, should he himself be unable to enjoy them?

Obtaining no satisfactory answers to these mental queries, and not feeling it safe to venture on shaping either of them into words, I only said, foolishly enough:—

"No, indeed, I could not consider you a fanatic, Mr. Wyke, having had the privilege of hearing you preach so many Sundays. I am only sorry that for any cause you should fail to enjoy what I myself and all your

parishioners cannot help so thoroughly enjoying."

"Thank you," he replied, simply, and rather abruptly; and yet there was something in his voice that touched me, and made me wish earnestly for a moment, that the power were given me to comfort, in whatever way he might need comfort, the grave, lonely, patient man, whose life was spent in comforting those around him.

We were so near the house now that we made no further attempt at conversation while we were together. It did not take us long to find the little room we were in quest of, and the Miss Downings being still there, Mr. Wyke delivered me into their keeping, and, with a kind good-bye, retraced his steps to the place where his friend was to meet him.

"You see we have made ourselves very comfortable in our solitude," said Miss Downing, when, the history of my own and

Jane's adventures having been given, I was resting for a few minutes on the unoccupied end of Miss Dora's sofa.

It really appeared that they had done so, and without much difficulty, I thought, considering the appliances at command.

Through the open window of this pleasant little sanctum came the mingled odours of jessamine and roses, which were trained on the outer wall, and suffered one of their richly-laden boughs every now and then to flutter into the room and cast a light, dancing shadow, on the polished oaken floor. Just beside this window stood a table supplied with all imaginable delicacies, in the shape of fruits, wines, and jellies, to tempt the appetite of the sick or the weary; and then for mental food there was a book-case well stocked with books of every description likely to be taken up by temporary sojourners in the room, and from which Miss Downing had selected a somewhat ponderous looking volume, en-

titled — “ The Law of Nations,” and Miss Dora a prettily bound edition of L. E. L.—’s poems.

So they were both very comfortable and happy, and in no hurry to return to the noisier scene beyond. The music reached them sometimes in faint, broken utterances of harmonious sounds, which Miss Dora said made her feel deliciously sleepy, and Miss Harriet liked, because it carried her back (though she forgot to explain how or why) to the old classic days in which it would have been her glory to have lived and shone.

“ But you will not care, Miss Ethel, for staying quietly here with us ; ” the elder sister observed, when I had been sitting at Miss Dora’s feet for about a quarter of an hour, “ and how to get you back to the grounds and provide you with a fitting chaperone I know not. Dear Dora cannot be left.”

“ But I can go with you now wherever you like,” said Miss Dora, rising quite briskly,

and speaking as cheerfully as if she had never had an ailment in her life ; “ and, indeed, I do think, Harriet, we ought to find Jane, and release that flighty Mrs. Arnott from a charge she is doubtless weary of. I will trouble Miss Ethel to bring me a little more of that refreshing jelly from the table, and then I shall be quite prepared to accompany you both anywhere.”

While Miss Dora partook of her jelly, and Miss Harriet continued her entranced study of “The Law of Nations,” I stood by the open window, and thought how beautiful everything was at Beechwood. It was not the gaily dotted lawn and park that this little room looked upon, but a terrace stretching along the south side of the house, and bounded by a thick copse of tall trees, with narrow paths through it, which were too long and winding for me to follow with my rather short sight to the end.

But while I stood waiting for the sisters I could just discern two people entering this

copse from one of its sides, and walking slowly along the path that skirted the line of trees farthest from the terrace. They were a lady and gentleman in evidently close and earnest conversation; the former I knew to be Alicia Clarkson—the latter I more than suspected was Edmund Hallam.

Dear Alicia—she was happy and at rest, then, as regarded her heart's timid hopes, at last. I had thought as much when I first looked into her sweet face that morning, for there had been a something in it—I cannot say what it was—which I had never seen there before. Mrs. Hallam's liking for this girl must have triumphed over any more ambitious expectations she might once have formed for her son, and prompted her to consent to his asking Alicia to be his wife. I knew that without this maternal consent Alicia would scarcely, in her position, have permitted Edmund even to speak of love to her, and assuredly her modest countenance would never have worn that expression of full

and serene peace which distinguished it to-day.

And so Alicia Clarkson, the quiet, unassuming little girl, who would, doubtless, a short time ago, have thought two hundred a year a handsome competence, would, by and bye, be mistress of Beechwood, walking in rustling silks through these stately rooms, and taking her place as one of the first ladies of the county. And it would all come very naturally to her, all her honors sit most easily upon her graceful shoulders. She was one of those women—gentle, good, and of quiet hearts—whom no destiny can very much surprise or take at a disadvantage. As the wife of a poor man, Alicia would be cheerful, content, industrious, and long-enduring. As the wife of a rich one, of the highest in social rank, she would fulfil her duties meekly, but with unerring tact, and in either position give the notion to all around her that she had been born and educated in and for that alone.

I had got thus far in my musings about

Alicia, and the brilliant future that seemed in store for her, when I was roused by an announcement from Miss Dora that she was now quite ready, and a sudden proposal from Miss Downing that, before returning to the lawn, we should make the tour of those rooms thrown open on this occasion to the guests at Beechwood.

As this suggestion was agreeable both to Miss Dora and myself, we at once decided on adopting it, and more than half an hour passed rapidly away while we walked leisurely through the handsome apartments, examining the pictures, the bronzes, and many other curious works of art which abounded at Beechwood.

At length we arrived at the door of the music room—the first door we had found closed of all those we had hitherto passed through. I had just suggested that there might be some one within the room, when we heard a hand run lightly over the keys of an apparently magnificent piano, and the next

moment my cousin Meta's voice thrilled in its fullest, richest tones, through the profound quiet around us.

I was too startled at the first instant to make any observation, but Miss Downing, who had also recognised the voice, said immediately, and in pleased accents :

“ Miss Kauffman, I declare ; let us go in and listen to her.”

So Miss Dora, who looked very much as if she were ready to creep to some quiet sofa again, opened the door softly—the piano was quite at the other end of the long room—and we all crossed the threshold.

Not a step beyond, however, for neither of us desired to intrude upon or even be seen by the group surrounding the singer.

By her side and turning over the leaves of her music was Mr. Walter Kenyon, an evidently enthusiastic admirer of the sweet, harmonious sounds, that Meta's pretty lips were pouring forth (might it not be for his entertainment chiefly ?)

Just behind him sat Mrs. Vivian, with a complacent, satisfied expression on her face, as if she had herself some part in the glory being won by her children's governess; and indeed she had (as I afterwards discovered) the merit of having induced Meta to bring her music, and of suggesting that she should display her talent for the benefit of the chosen few whom she knew would appreciate it. But amongst these, with the exception of the two I have already named, I only recognized one, though nearly a dozen ladies and gentlemen stood or sat somewhere near the piano. This one—somewhat to my surprise, considering how recently I had seen him wholly engrossed as I believed with Alicia Clarkson—was Edmund Hallam; and if it had not been for what Alicia had told me that last Sunday afternoon she spent at Lindenhurst about the passion all the Hallams had for singing, I should have been a little anxious on her account in witnessing the wrapt and entranced

delight with which he appeared just now to be listening to Meta.

And even I could understand this, for apart from its scientific perfection there was a peculiar charm and fascination about my cousin's singing that I should think the coldest person in existence must have been touched by. It was one of those voices which seem to appeal to the heart rather than to the ear, and to draw the listener for the time into a world of passion and romance from which he emerges sadly and reluctantly, and with its strange beauty haunting him, when the song is done.

It was a wild German melody with which Meta had commenced on this occasion, and when it was finished, the applause quite shook the room, and was only stilled by two or three eager voices entreating her to sing again. Amongst these Edmund Hallam, who had not applauded at all, was foremost, and I certainly felt glad that Alicia did not see the expression

of her lover's eyes as, on Meta's resuming her place at the piano, he took his station on the side opposite to Mr. Kenyon, and this time looked at, as well as listened to, the fair singer.

We waited only for this second song to be over, and then, leaving the music room, retraced our steps to the entrance hall, and so passed out upon the crowded lawn again, and soon found a comparatively quiet seat for Miss Dora, who was by this time incapable of any further exertion. Presently she said she wished her sister and myself would go in search of Jane, that she should be quite happy alone till we returned, and that she thought Mrs. Arnott's patience ought not to be taxed any longer.

After a little discussion as to the propriety of the step she suggested, and a little more as to our chances of finding any one we wanted in such a motley crowd—distributed, too, over so extensive a space, it was finally agreed that the attempt should be made, but that if

not successful in half-an-hour, we should give it up and join Miss Dora again in the sheltered retreat where, with many misgivings on her sister's part, we were about to leave her.

So Miss Downing and I went forth as wanderers across the lawn, where even moderately rapid progress was impossible, into the wider park, where, from the variety of roads, and our ignorance as to the particular points of popular attraction to which any of them would conduct us, our difficulties rather increased than diminished; and finally into a thick wood that looked so cool and tempting, that we neither of us felt inclined to pursue our wild goose chase any further, until we had rested for awhile under one of those grand old trees, and suffered the murmur of that busy, holiday-keeping world, to flow by us while we took no part for the time in its somewhat noisy enjoyment.

"This is really delicious," said Miss Downing, when we had chosen our seat, and were luxuriating in the quiet beauty and

peaceful stillness all around us. "I should have been content to spend my whole day here, with a congenial companion; a mind, Miss Ethel, with which my own could have held profitable communion; a mind, whose powers must have been quickened and expanded in a calm scene of nature's providing such as this—a mind——"

"Like our vicar's for instance?" I suggested a little mischievously, as Miss Harriet paused in the effort as I thought to find yet choicer words in which to express her poetical ideas. "I am sure no one could fail to get profit from holding communion with him."

"Undoubtedly, my dear, undoubtedly; and I am rejoiced to find that Mr. Wyke's excellence is, even at this early stage of his ministrings amongst us, appreciated by one of the most intelligent of his listeners; but I was not thinking when I spoke of the kind of profit to be gained from a preacher, though that must of course be at all times desirable. It was the yearning after intellectual fellow-

ship that this bright, calm scene, awakened in my heart. You, Miss Ethel, have a sister whose mental capacities I know you consider even superior to your own ; you can scarcely estimate the blank in the lives of those who dwell in entire mental solitude. Do not misunderstand me in reference to my dearest Dora, whose character I respect as much as I love it. She is essentially feminine in all her gifts and graces, and possesses quite as much intellect as any woman need have, for all the ordinary purposes of the world we inhabit ; but there are regions into which I never can take her with me—there are depths I am compelled to descend alone ; there is a cloud-land which her tender woman's eyes would ache in straining unto, and so I wrap myself in my own harder thoughts and imaginings ; and, except on rare occasions like the present, am tolerably content with my unshared kingdom."

"There are not many very intellectual people at Graybourne," I said, feeling rather ashamed

of replying by such a common-place observation to a speech like Miss Harriet's—only I could think of nothing else at the moment to say.

“There are none, Miss Ethel, besides your sister and yourself,” she rejoined with warmth, “and I need not tell you that there must ever exist a certain barrier between girls of your age and women of mine, however nearly balanced may be their intellectual capacities.”

“Oh, but indeed, neither Gertie nor myself claim to be intellectual,” I said, not desiring to appropriate the compliment offered. “She likes dry studies, and I like all kinds of desultory reading; either of these tastes may exist without much superiority of intellect, don't you agree with me, Miss Downing?”

“Scarcely,” she replied, with so thoughtful a face, and in such a patiently argumentative tone, that I resigned myself to a discussion of probably greater length than interest, and was beginning to assume a look of courteous at-

tention, when, a little to my relief, I must confess, there came footsteps rustling over some of last year's dead leaves in the path behind us, and a minute afterwards a gentleman, with a young, smiling lady on his arm, was standing before us, the lady saying in pleased and excited tones :

“ Aunt Harriet, Mr. Burns wishes to be introduced to you.”

CHAPTER XVI.

ENDING OF THE FETE.

Now Burns was the name of the editor with whom Miss Downing had so long held a literary correspondence, and concerning whom report said that she had striven in vain for eight years to become personally known to him.

Under these circumstances, the reader will be prepared to hear that it was not without very manifest embarrassment that Jane Norton's aunt saluted the gentleman so abruptly presented to her by that singularly happy-looking young lady. I believe I had myself heard

the name of Burns in connection with the editor of our local journal, but at that moment I certainly did not remember it. I recognised in Jane's present companion the dancing partner with whom I had left her, and I was amused in thinking how greatly Jane's own ideal of enjoyment had been improved upon, by the substitution of a very respectable and probably agreeable admirer for a senseless cat.

Mr. Burns in the meanwhile was addressing some very courteous speeches, though in the simplest possible language, to the delighted Miss Harriet, who discovered from almost his first words that he was really her unknown correspondent—the intellectual prodigy whose society she would have chosen before any other on this happy fête day.

As soon as Jane could put in a syllable of her own, she had a long explanation to give, albeit no one had as yet asked her for it, or challenged the propriety of her being in that quiet wood alone with an acquaintance of an hour.

Mr. Burns had been so excessively kind to her, she said. He would not hear of Mrs. Arnott taking her from him when the quadrille was over. Mrs. Arnott would be sure to keep with the dancers, and Mr. Burns thought his young friend would like to see a little of all that was going on; so he had been her guide to every part of the park where the entertainments of the day were being diligently pursued; they had seen the boat racing, and the archery, and a balloon ascent, and listened to the different bands, and had refreshments in one of the finest tents, and were on their way to a very picturesque spot in the park (which Mr. Burns had often visited and greatly admired), when Jane had discovered her aunt and myself, and her companion had begged for an introduction to the former—not, however, aware when he did so that he should be brought face to face with the lady whose charming writings had made her already, in some sense, known to him.

And poor Miss Harriet, a little intoxicated

at this unexpected realization of so many hopes, blushed like a girl at his matter of course politeness, and asked if he would allow her to introduce him to her sister Dora.

Mr. Burns was evidently in the humour to allow anything of a reasonable nature, so it was soon decided that we should all return together to the lawn, and I began to think that my own individual part in the day's amusements was not likely to be of a very exciting character.

Nevertheless, as Jane and myself slowly followed our two elders (for Mr. Burns had no choice but to offer his arm to Miss Downing) I felt tolerably satisfied to have things as they were. Independently of the positive enjoyment to be derived from such a summer sky above, and such a summer scene around me, my nature experienced real delight in watching whatever was genuine in the emotions of others, and in weaving for them a future history to which these emotions should lead.


My weaving, however, was done in secret,

while Jane Norton, who wove too, gave me the full benefit of her young mind's industry.

"I am so glad, Miss Ethel," she began—"so very happy to think that I have been the means of bringing about this introduction. Only fancy poor little me being made the instrument of such a great work. Did you ever see dear Aunt Harriet look so pleased? and are they not a well-matched pair as to height, and age, and everything? Oh I am quite certain it will be all right now, are not you?"

"What will be all right, Jane?" I asked, though it would have been difficult not to guess the young lady's meaning.

"Oh, you know—though indeed I should be lectured for an hour by both aunties if they could hear me. The truth is I see, and cannot help seeing, a thousand things that are not intended for my vision, and that perhaps it is an impertinence on my part to observe at all. Still, what can I do, if the faculty has been given me? Is it my fault if I have



discovered, while nursing the cat, that Aunt Harriet, with all her sweet temper and amiability, is not quite a happy woman, and that the one desire of her life, at least since I have lived with her, has been to meet a being in whom she could recognise a kindred soul ; and that this being has always taken, in her dreams, the name of Burns."

"Jane," I said, "your imagination must be in sad need of pruning. I should have supposed Miss Downing far too strong-minded for the romance you attribute to her, which would be more in your Aunt .Dora's style. But, apart from this, do you think Mr. Burns the kind of man of whom anybody, when they knew him, could make a hero?"

"I am sure he is a very nice, kind man," replied Jane eagerly, "and if he is getting on in years, Aunt Harriet herself is not a girl. Mr. Burns has good eyes, a handsome nose, a very passable mouth, with beautifully white teeth; and not a dozen gray hairs in his head."

"Well done, Jane," I said, "you have made excellent use of your time, but let me seriously advise you, in spite of all these advantages and my own belief that he is really a 'nice, kind man,' not to begin match-making for him or for anybody. It is a most unprofitable employment, and generally ends either in disappointment or mischief of some sort."

It was very obvious that my wisdom, in this case, did marvellously little towards crushing Jane's foolishness. She was far too elated with her own grand castle to pull even a stone of it down at my bidding.

"At least," she said, coaxingly, "you will acknowledge that the thing is likely to happen, now that they actually know each other, and are sure to find out that they have kindred tastes and sentiments, and so on."

"But I don't think this is at all sure, Jane," I obstinately persisted; "the mere fact of a man being the editor of a newspaper does not necessarily imply the existence of

that intellectual superiority your aunt, according to you, has been dreaming of, or sighing for. Besides, many intellectual men prefer women of simple, domestic tastes and habits, such as your aunt Dora for instance."

"So they may; but I don't think Mr. Burns will. Just see how eagerly, and with what animation, they appear to be talking together just now. He evidently receives with great interest every word she is saying, and you know, Aunt Harriet can talk well when she pleases. I wonder when she will ask him over to tea, and what she will get for him."

We had by this time reached the lawn again, and as Jane gave utterance to her last sentence, which had rather amused me as being so unmistakeably a Jane Norton transition, I suddenly caught sight of a party in the distance, amongst whom I fancied I recognised both Gertrude and Meta Kauffman.

"I must leave you," I said, hurriedly, to my companion; "but you will get up to

your aunt in a moment, by walking a little faster. Tell her I saw my sister and cousin, and could not resist joining them."

"All right," Jane answered, good-humouredly; and in another minute she was, I presume, safe at Miss Downing's side, and I, somewhat out of breath, and flushed, was standing in the centre of a group, of which the two I sought formed part, but included several others, nearly strangers to me.

"However did you manage to be carried off by such gay people?" I whispered to Gertie, the first moment I had an opportunity of doing so. "I left you with quiet Mrs. Luke, and I find you in this goodly company, and looking as calm and composed as if you had been amongst them all your life."

"I only look as I feel," Gertrude replied, smiling, and drawing me a little back from her companions; "but where have you been all this time, Ethel, and what has become of Jane Norton?"

"I will relate my adventures by-and-bye, Gertie. At present I want to hear yours. You have, of course, been introduced to Meta?"

"Yes; I was still with Mrs. Luke, but getting rather tired of my gossiping and restless chaperone, when we fell in with Mr. Hallam, Alicia Clarkson, and Meta. Alicia told Meta who I was, and our fair cousin immediately claimed the right of taking me from Mrs. Luke, who made no great objection to resigning me, having, I imagine, had nearly enough of Beechwood; and so I joined the trio we had met, and by degrees our number increased, and we are now on our way to have some tea and coffee which we were told was being dispensed to a favoured few in a small tent near Mrs. Hallam's. I am so glad you have come, Ethel. Meta has been walking with, and talking to me; but I feel there is no bond except our cousinship between us, and I am thankful to escape the *tête-à-tête*. Do you think there is anything serious in *that* quarter?"

She indicated Mr. Hallam and Alicia Clarkson, who were now walking side by side again, Meta having paired off with Walter Kenyon, and the rest of the group composed of older persons of both sexes, moving leisurely in front of us younger ones.

"Yes," I said—"I feel sure they are engaged, and I am so delighted on dear Alicia's account. How sweet and pure and calm she looks to-day. But what do you think of Meta's appearance?"

"Attractive undoubtedly, but they say her singing is something marvellous. Mr. Kenyon raved to me about it just now."

"Mr. Kenyon! Have you had much conversation with him, then, Gertie?"

"Very little, but supposing it had been very much, why should you look so alarmed? Have you discovered since we parted that there is anything dangerous in this young man?"

"I have discovered nothing," I said; and

being really at a loss to account for the momentary feeling of vexation with which I had heard that Mr. Kenyon had been talking to my sister—"except that Mr. Wyke knew this gentleman two or three years ago. He spoke highly of him, and appeared pleased at the idea of meeting him again. But what do *you* think of him, Gertie?"

Smilingly and lightly she answered—"I have not bestowed two thoughts on him yet, Ethel—but now that you call upon me to do so, I believe I must acknowledge that I found him agreeable and very gentlemanly. Meta is apparently of the same opinion."

"Oh, Meta, in her craving for admiration, will stoop to accept it from any one. I fancy if poor mamma saw her to-day she would speak less confidently of Guy's chance of winning her. The very idea of her marrying that boy is absurd."

"Quite absurd indeed," assented my sister. "Now that I have seen our cousin I shall

soon be able to disabuse mamma's mind of so wild a notion—but Meta is looking back after us ; we shall have to join her.”

“I have not yet had a word with you to-day, Ethel,” said Meta, as we came up to her, and she glided round by my side, while her companion at the same instant placed herself by Gertrude. “I want to thank you for the timely warning you gave me just now, though I scarcely think it was necessary. I am changed since I met that vicar of yours three years ago; and his eyes have a trick of glancing at objects and people somewhat carelessly, as if the mind had no part in the act. I am, however, no less indebted to you for your friendliness, and I should like to be assured that you believe what I told you when I was at Lindenhurst. Do you trust me so far, Ethel?”

Her voice was coaxing and seductive ; her manner pleading and almost childlike ; her beautiful eyes had a suspicion of tears in them as she lifted them enquiringly to mine ; and so

I was touched and won in spite of myself, and I squeezed the hand she timidly offered me and assured her I had no doubt of her truth, and that I would wait with patience her own unravelling of the mystery which surrounded her.

“Dear, dear Ethel!” she said then, and now the tears really came, and stood upon the long fringed lids. “I shall never, never cease to be grateful for your kindness. I shall love you always. Ah, if you knew how my heart yearns and aches for love.”

I would have answered her, but that I could not, do what I would, prevent the uneasy sensations with which I listened to the half whispered dialogue going on so close to me between Mr. Walter Kenyon and Gertrude. I do not mean that *she* spoke in a lower voice than usual, for I don't think it was the case, but *he* seemed to me to be talking in softer, quieter and more earnest tones that he had any right to do to a young lady only just made known to him. I suppose I

looked vexed and preoccupied, for Meta, after a bit, said abruptly—

“Don’t be alarmed for your pretty sister (she is very, very pretty, Ethel,) but don’t be alarmed that the gentleman who is talking to her has the faintest design of carrying her off. He makes himself agreeable to all ladies, young and old, but he never falls in love with any. You have no fear, I am sure, for Gertrude’s own heart. She is too English, and too matter of fact, and too sensible generally, is she not, for *that* to be in jeopardy?”

“Of course I have no fear,” I replied a little sharply, for I believed there was some latent satire in Meta’s words—“but I am not fond of new acquaintances, and Mr. Kenyon appears to me a very light, trifling sort of young man, and—and, in short, I think I must be getting tired, for I wish it was later and that we were safe and quiet at home again.”

“You looked particularly happy when I first saw you with Mr. Wyke.”

"Oh, yes, I have no doubt I did, for I felt happy; and I have, on the whole, enjoyed the day, perhaps as much as anybody—still I shall not be sorry when it is over. Even at school a whole holiday, as we used to call an entire day of idleness or pleasure, wearied me very much. Recreation is delightful after work, but unless I have worked first I cannot thoroughly enjoy it."

"And when does your work begin?" Meta asked.

"Next week, when the little Munroes (our two boarders) are to arrive. By the bye, you have not managed to come so often as you anticipated to Lindenhurst, Meta."

"No, there is plenty of teaching to be got through at the Vivians, I assure you, and in the evenings they require me to come in and sing to them. I have positively no time at all to myself."

"Yet you like your new home. You are very happy and comfortable, are you not?"

"I like it, and I am quite comfortable,

Ethel. Happiness is a thing apart from our outward position, I think ; some natures are not capable of the calm which constitutes happiness. I doubt if I have ever been *really* happy in my life."

"Meta, does Guy write to you sometimes?"

I asked the question abruptly, and startled my cousin a little, it appeared ; but she replied in a minute frankly enough :—

"He has written once since I have been at Fell House, and I have answered his letter."

"Do you intend to keep up a correspondence?"

"No, I have told him that I have no time ; that it is better not."

At this moment Gertrude came and touched my arm ; we had been gradually getting a few yards in advance of my sister and her companion.

"Ethel, Mr. Kenyon wished to be introduced to you. He says he owes you an apology for something he declines revealing

to me. Let me give you my place, as I see Alicia Clarkson is free for a few moments, and I want to have a chat with her."

Mr. Walter Kenyon expressed in very choice words the pleasure he had in making my acquaintance, to which courtesy I am sure I replied stiffly if not coldly, and then he said he had recognised me as the lady whom Mr. Wyke had been escorting in the morning, and whom he believed that gentleman had been ungallant enough to leave on his account.

"Mr. Wyke was quite justified in so doing," I replied frigidly, adding, with rather unnecessary emphasis; "He is too good and straightforward a man to think of mere gallantry when the claims of an old friendship are in question."

Here Walter Kenyon laughed, (*I saw nothing to laugh at*) and, as I turned to look at him, I observed that his face, pleasant and even handsome as it undoubtedly was, had a very decided expression of weakness in it, which, scarcely noticeable while his features

were in repose, came out in strong relief with the mirth my remark had excited.

"This reverend gentleman does me too much honour, if he gives the name of friendship to our former slight acquaintance," he said, laughing still, "but if I stay any time in the neighbourhood I shall be glad to see more of him. He is a clever man, and I have a very especial yearning towards all clever people."

"You were not long enough with him to-day to judge much of his mental capacities," I observed, feeling almost a necessity laid upon me to say something disagreeable.

"Oh, no, on a day like this, one does not care for rational or sensible conversation. I don't, at least, but then I am a most imperfect individual, Miss Beamish, and on most occasions do the things I ought not to do, and leave undone those it would be my duty to perform. Now, for instance, I believe I ought to be looking for Mrs. Vivian and offering her my services, her excellent lord and master

being too stout and apoplectic to walk about, but instead of this I am amusing myself in a more congenial way, and pressing out of the agreeable fruit offered to me all the richest juices it contains. Don't you disapprove entirely of my conduct?"

"I have no right either to approve or condemn it," I replied, with a little less churlishness, for his frank humility, though intermixed with a sprinkling of lightness, had given a blow to my prejudice against this young man, "but if Mrs. Vivian is in any degree dependant on you for seeing what is going on to-day, I should advise you to seek her out at once. She would doubtless be glad to know of the tea and coffee distribution in the tent we are bound for."

"A good idea—a kind one on your part, I mean, Miss Beamish—and when you are all safely inside the tent, I will leave you and do my duty. Oh, what a pity!—it seems *this* is the land of promise we are in quest of, as the old ladies and their cavaliers in front of us are

filing into it. Do you decide that I *must* go and ransack park and lawn, and tents and state rooms, for Mrs. Vivian?"

"If *you* have decided that it is your duty I may leave your own conscience to do the rest," I replied; and then he said laughingly (but this time I rather admired his laugh):—

"One can see *you* have profited by the vicar's companionship to-day, Miss Beamish. I don't wonder now that *my* society soon gave him a head-ache, and compelled him to go home."

We were parted in the crush that accompanied our entrance into the already closely packed tent, which should either have been six times as large, or have kept its secret better in reference to the beverages to be partaken of inside. I did not see Mr. Kenyon again, but whether he really went in search of Mrs. Vivian or not I have no idea. I was myself at length jostled to a place between Alicia Clarkson and an elderly lady frightfully out of temper, because she said her dress was

being trodden from her back, and also because the luxury of a cup of tea or coffee seemed much farther off than if she had yearned for that refreshment in the desert of Sahara. Alicia was looking tired, and, I thought, a little sad. Could it be for so slight a reason that not far behind us stood, gaily chatting together, Meta and Edmund Hallam, who doubtless, on his way back to Alicia, had been wedged in and detained hopelessly and against his will in the spot where we discovered him.

I do not believe that Alicia had a particle of suspicion or jealousy in her nature, so I daresay the insignificant circumstance I have referred to had nothing to do with her weary aspect. Yet, if I had been in her place I am not sure that I should have felt quite comfortable in witnessing the effect of Meta Kauffman's allurements on the gentleman standing beside her, and bowing his tall figure to catch every sound of her musical voice.

Of my sister I saw nothing more for the next ten minutes, at the end of which time,

Alicia and myself having been gradually propelled by the crowd behind us quite round the tent, without even catching a distant glimpse of the tea-table (if such a thing really existed) were amused at finding ourselves again at the entrance door, and experiencing quite as much difficulty in getting out as we had done in getting in.

Gertrude and another lady, who had been of our party, were yet outside, waiting, as it seemed to us, their chance of entering.

I shook my head ruefully as we approached them.

"The tea is very bad, and the coffee worse," I said, as they kindly expressed a hope that we had been refreshed by our potations, "and unless you are very thirsty indeed, I cannot recommend you to become applicants for the wretched stuff that is being dealt out in there. Alicia will tell you that this advice is friendly."

"We know all about it, thank you," replied Gertie, laughing, "and have accepted a prior

testimony as to the exceeding sourness of the grapes we had been foolishly hankering after. I only waited for you, Ethel, that we might go together to find our friends. Somebody has raised a report that a thunder storm is threatening, and perhaps Miss Dora may be nervous, and want to go home."

The clouds were, indeed, beginning to look alarming, and in many places the clear blue sky that had so lately smiled down serenely upon us, was entirely hidden. We bade Alicia a hasty farewell, and walked quickly to the spot where I expected to meet with our little party. They were all there, protected, and apparently well entertained by Mr. Burns, who, when we came up, was assuring the ladies there would still be ample time to get home, if their conveyance was anywhere near the park gates, before the storm commenced.

Our arrival was the signal for a general move. It was the weak and timid Miss Dora who this time leant upon their new friend's arm, the rest of us following close behind, and

rejoicing that for the invalid's sake we had obtained so gallant and efficient a protector.

Jane Norton was still in a state of effervescence very curious to see, and it required all Miss Downing's stately authority to keep her from giving some absurd expression to her intense contentment. It had been, she said, such a perfectly and indescribably delightful day, and everything had turned out so exactly as it should have done, and nothing had gone wrong, not even with Aunt Dora; and as for Aunt Harriet—"tell me," she whispered to me, as that lady was engaged for the moment talking to my sister, "if she does not look ten years younger within the last hour? Isn't it a lovely pink that has come into her cheeks, and when she smiles can't you fancy that she is including the whole world in her benignity?"

"Jane, you are certainly the oddest little person I ever met with," I exclaimed instinctively, as I turned to scrutinize more narrowly than I was in the habit of doing the counten-

ance of the young lady, whose organ of observation must have been a study to phrenologists. "Have you read many novels in your time, or has any curious personal experience made you wise beyond your years, regarding the hearts of those around you?"

"I have not read half-a-dozen novels in my life," laughed Jane, "for I do not even like them, and I don't know what you mean about personal experience. You cannot suppose I have ever felt as I imagine Aunt Harriet is feeling. It must be very funny, I should think, I mean strange, and rather pleasant to admire somebody very much indeed, and to have the hope that they will admire you in the same way. I shouldn't care about its happening to myself, and of course it never will, as I am neither pretty, nor clever, nor anything; but I like to see it happening to other people. I think it's the greatest fun in the world."

And while Jane spoke, I had been deciding that her ever changing countenance was more attractive than many far prettier ones, and

that nobody could look at it twice without discovering that its owner *had* a mind, however veiled this might generally be by her childish words and manner.

I only said to her now :—

“ Don’t, however, be too sanguine, or too imaginative, Jane. Mr. Burns may prove a very agreeable friend for all of you apart from the idea you have rather prematurely taken up. Has the invitation to tea been given yet?”

“ No, I believe not ; but he is coming to call at the beginning of next week, and to bring Aunt Harriet some books she was saying she could not get at Graybourne. I only hope he will not choose one of my school days for his visit. I told him I was going to school, Miss Ethel?”

“ And what did he think of the plan?”

“ Oh, he only laughed, and said he had no doubt it would be very good for me. There, I felt a large drop of rain on my hand ; the storm will be here directly, and then what will become of us?”

We were now quite close to the place where we hoped to find our carriage, and much too far from the house, and even from the tents, to think of seeking shelter at Beechwood. Miss Dora, who had a real horror of thunder storms, and was by this time completely worn out, looked very white indeed, and every step seemed to cost her an effort. In her anxiety for her sister, Miss Downing quite forgot to keep up her character of authoress and *femme d'esprit*, and exhibited herself in the more natural and pleasing one of an affectionate, unselfish woman. As the invalid was too frightened, as well as too ill, to be left without a male escort, Jane and myself volunteered to walk on down the road, lined with every description of vehicle (many of which were now being eagerly claimed by their owners) till we should meet with the one we sought; but although this plan was adopted in default of a better, I don't know how we should have managed, in the increasing confusion and rapidly nearing storm, had not

most unlooked-for help come to us in the shape of our kind vicar who (according to ordinary calculation) ought to have reached home more than an hour ago.

He never explained how he happened to be standing without an umbrella, and getting wet through as fast as he could, under the park wall, and with his own vehicle within a few yards of him. The moment Jane and myself came in sight, he recognised us (this alone was wonderful), and said he knew where our carriage was, and would call it immediately.

He returned with us to the rest of our party, and finding that Mr. Burns had offered to accompany the Miss Downings home, on account of the helpless state of poor Miss Dora and her sister's genuine alarm about her, Mr. Wyke very kindly proposed taking either my sister or myself in his conveyance, which happened to be an old-fashioned post chaise, and only held two.

"You go," I whispered to Gertrude, thinking that it would be more agreeable to the

vicar, as he had already had so much of my society during the morning ; but her look of severe dissent from this suggestion made me say quickly, lest he should notice and be hurt by it :—

“ Please to have me once more, Mr. Wyke. I never was in a post chaise, and I like all old fashioned things immensely.”

He said, in his very quiet way, that he should be equally happy to accommodate either of us, and so I was lifted into the high wheeled, yellow machine, just as the storm burst upon us, and a little shriek from poor Miss Dora (as their carriage rolled past ours), announced that her nerves had given way at last, and that the attendance of Mr. Burns would not be an unneeded luxury.

“ *You* are not afraid of thunder ?” said my companion, turning with a kindly anxious face to me, as a louder clap succeeded the first we had heard, and our horses showed symptoms of restiveness.

“ No, not in the least”

inflicted my presence upon you if I had been."

"I hope you would. Do you think, then, I shrink from whatever is not smooth and agreeable?"

"I only think I should not wish to be the disagreeable object in your way. I am afraid the necessity of disposing of me this morning curtailed your enjoyment of your friend Mr. Kenyon's society."

"I don't know that you need regret that circumstance particularly. Mr. Kenyon did not appear to care very much for remaining with me. I was stupid to expect he would, at such a time. By the bye, I hope you enjoyed yourself after I left you?"

"Pretty well. I was introduced to this Mr. Kenyon."

"Ah, indeed! and how did you like him?"

"Rather better than I expected to do. He seems frank, and is certainly gentlemanly and winning in manner."

"Yes, so I always considered him. He talks of spending some time at the Vivians."

"Does he? Then you will meet him often, I dare say?"

"I am not confident of that, Miss Ethel. Young people do not generally put themselves in the way of those they think may preach to them. If I am not mistaken Walter Kenyon has drifted, or is fast drifting, into another current than the one I believed he had embarked on when I first knew him. Forgive me for these remarks, and remember it was you who began speaking of the gentleman this time."

We got upon other topics then, and in spite of the raging elements without, I can answer for myself that the drive to Graybourne was very far from a dull one. Several times when the lightning was very vivid, the horses reared and plunged a little, and on these occasions Mr. Wyke was even nervously anxious lest I should be alarmed, but by degrees my composure satisfied him that I


was not a timid young lady, and on landing me safely at our own door he went so far as to congratulate me on my courageousness, and to add that he hoped I should be able to impart some portion of this desirable quality to his poor little shrinking, frightened girl, when she became my pupil.

"Give my love to Maggie," I said, after I had shaken hands with her father, and thanked him for all his kindness during the day, "and tell her I, at least, wished she had been with us, if only to have given papa a chance of enjoying the fête a little bit."

"How do you know I did not enjoy it?" he asked, with a smile, I suppose, at my pretending to have understood his feelings.

"I am afraid you did not," I answered; and then I became unpleasantly conscious of growing red, as I thought of the strong desire which had arisen in my mind to comfort the good vicar when I fancied he was out of spirits.

Thanks to the gentleman's inveterate habit



of looking on the ground, he was none the wiser for my heightened colour, but he shook hands with me a second time (no doubt in forgetfulness that he had already once performed that little ceremony), and said, rather shyly:—

“I enjoyed it all quite as much as I expected, or even wished to do. You need have no regrets on my account, Miss Ethel. Good bye, now, for your mother will be anxious about you, and I think these poor horses have had about enough of it.”

CHAPTER XVII.

BY THE STEPPING STONES.

THE Beechwood entertainment, which to all appearance had begun and ended so serenely and uneventfully (with the exception, indeed, of the thunder-storm that only sent the majority of the guests to their homes an hour or two before they would otherwise have dispersed), did in reality sow the seeds of many important changes in the fate of several individuals who were at the time wholly unconscious of exciting the activity of the weird sisters presiding over human life and destiny.

Amongst the immediate and visible results

of that one day's unaccustomed exertion and festivity, was the rather serious illness of poor Miss Dora Downing. We heard of it the next morning from our village Esculapius, dapper little Mr. Luke, whose periodical visit of inquiry at Lindenhurst happened to be due on that occasion.

He told us he had been sent for the previous evening, to recover the lady from a succession of fainting fits, and that, though she had enjoyed a tolerably good night, he had found her excessively weak and languid in the morning, and had been obliged to see her twice before starting on his usual rounds.

"A bad subject, I am afraid, for anything like a *bona-fide* illness," he had said, in concluding his account, "and, if I'm not mistaken, the poor nervous little woman is in for it in earnest now."

"What do you think it is?" mamma anxiously inquired, for Miss Dora, as well as her sister, was greatly liked amongst us.

"Oh, my dear lady," replied the discreet

surgeon, "that is far more than I am able at present to tell. It may be pleurisy, it may be congestion of the liver, it may be rheumatic fever, it may be jaundice, it may be a combination or a complication of all these; or it is just possible it may be nothing more than intense nervous exhaustion consequent upon the excitement and fatigue of yesterday. Why, there is my wife, a strong, active, healthy woman, as you all know; well, there she is, lying about on the sofa with head-ache and low spirits this morning. You'll excuse me saying it, but you ladies are really such impressionable, susceptible beings, that it takes less than nothing to knock you over. I am glad to find, however, that there are no patients waiting for me here. Your young people, Mrs. Beamish, are looking even more than usually bright and blooming."

"Thank you, they are in excellent health," mamma replied, smiling fondly round at Gertie and myself. "They have neither of

them complained yet of paying any penalty for their amusement of yesterday."

"Well, well," said the little doctor, who, notwithstanding his acknowledged dandyism, had a spice of sentiment in his composition, "youth is a glorious thing, the one golden bubble on our life's troubled and muddy stream; but it breaks too soon, my dear lady, it breaks too soon;" (here Mr. Luke, perhaps unconsciously, passed his hand over that part of his head from which the hair was gradually retreating;) "and then for the remainder of our existence we can do nothing but chant its requiem, some sadly, some passionately, some with tolerable philosophy, as the case may be, but all, all, real mourners—deny it who will!—for the glory that has departed from us, and that can come to us again no more for ever. No, no, at the ages of your young ladies, Mrs. Beamish, a few extra pleasures or even pains will leave no traces behind, will necessitate no doctors' bills, will

entail no stinging-nettles of any description. By the bye, Miss Gertrude, I suppose I must not repeat a word of what I heard said about you yesterday, and again this morning, at some of the houses I have called at. It does not do, as my wife tells me, to make young people vain. Of course, though (this is to cover your blushes), you have all heard of the engagement between young Hallam and Alicia Clarkson?"

"No, we only guessed it," I said, "and had just been talking about it when you came in, Mr. Luke. If this is indeed true, it is the pleasantest news you have brought us for many a day. Really, Mrs. Hallam must be a charming old lady, to give her consent so readily."

"Not a bad sort, not a bad sort I assure you, Miss Ethel, to those who understand her. But to my mind the case is as clear as noonday. Here is an elderly gentlewoman of family and fortune who has outlived ambition, if she ever had any to speak of, who is devotedly attached

to her only son and wishes above all things to keep him near her for the remnant of her days ; and here is the son asking his mother's consent to his marrying a pretty, well conducted young girl of whom he knows the old lady is already excessively fond, and would miss as much as her right hand were she to leave Beechwood. Alice hasn't a penny it is true, and has been earning her bread for two or three years as a hired companion—but what of that ? She comes of a good family, is a perfect lady, and will beyond all manner of doubt make a model wife and daughter-in-law. There, now you have the whole matter cut and dry ; and yet, mark my words, there will be enough gossiping, and speculating, and wondering, and croaking, about this very simple thing to keep our dull county in a ferment for six months. Good morning, ladies, I have exceeded my allotted time by fifteen minutes, and must now step along pretty briskly to make up for it."

As mamma walked out into the hall with

Mr. Luke (I don't know whether it was with any object of discovering what he had heard said of Gertie) my sister remarked to me that it would be necessary for one of us to go down into the village by and bye to enquire after Miss Dora.

"And if you don't mind, Ethel," she continued—"I should be glad for you to perform this little duty, because I could take the opportunity of being alone with mamma, to speak to her about Guy and Meta."

"So you could, dear, though I am pretty sure it will be love's labour lost. However, I am quite willing to call at the Downings, and of course in my absence you can do your best."

Accordingly, I started on my errand as soon as our early tea was over; and the evening being very cool and delicious after the storm of yesterday, I chose a roundabout way to the village, through some meadows, and a shady lane or two; and loitered in idle mood to enjoy the rose scented air, to listen

to the murmur of a little stream whose course I was following, and to think and speculate in the old, dreamy, school girl fashion which had as yet by no means lost its charm for me.

It may be supposed that on this occasion my thoughts would naturally, if not inevitably, dwell chiefly on the scenes and occurrences of the previous day—on the short but brilliant pageant that had stood out like a gaudily tinted picture amongst the very sober ones, both as to colour and grouping, which represented my daily life. But it was not so. I had little temptation to-night to think of Beechwood at all. My dreamings were of the past, of my childhood and earlier youth, of my dead father, of the days when we lived at the vicarage; (a more ancient mansion than the dwelling of the present vicar, Mr. Dallas having at his own expense pulled down nearly every stone of the old house and reared a new one in its stead;) of our brother Guy, and the hopes and expectations we used

to indulge in concerning him when we were all happy, merry children together. We did not think at that time that he would be a clergyman; he had never exhibited any decided leaning towards his father's calling, and our dreams for him were rather of literary greatness, of some marvellous achievements in the world of letters which should exalt him to the very pinnacle of fame, and prove to the whole admiring world what was really in him. That Guy had genius there had since been abundant proofs to show, but I scarcely think that any could be received as more conclusive than the simple fact that this genius was recognized and believed in by his own sisters while they were yet almost children, and he himself was their inferior in years.

Well, I was meditating, this summer evening, principally on Guy's genius, on that "something" which was assuredly in him, but which might possibly never, as far as the world was concerned, have any

outward expression. He was not industrious, he had but scant ambition; his health was not of the most vigorous; and above all, while yet the boyish down was on his lip, he had been so unfortunate as to fall in love; not in the way that boys of his age usually commit this folly—lightly, carelessly, and with inherent power to break the bonds whenever they should grow weary of them—but deeply, earnestly, and with all the strength of his passionate heart and soul thrown recklessly into the venture; in the way, in short, that the very genius I have been speaking of made natural to him, and took out of the range of the common place, as it would have taken any other passion or any other absorbing interest that might have come into the story of his life. I had read indeed and heard that to some natures love was an inspiration, an incentive to the highest efforts, a quickener and sustainer of genius, no less than its richest reward. Why might it not be all this to Guy? Was there anything in the

object of his passion to hinder it, or was the passion itself to blame? I believed the latter quite as much as the former, and yet I was not enough of a metaphysician to understand wherefore it should be so. I was ignorant then of the fact that love, as a passion, love indeed as generally felt by men of ardent natures, has a far greater tendency to enslave than to enoble, to render selfish than to free from selfishness.

It is only when that element in love which is "of the earth, earthy," is taken out of it, by the purifying fires of sorrow, or the slower process of time's inevitable revealings, that the divine passion becomes really divine, and capable of transforming into a god a figure of mortal clay.

But one thing was very clear to me even now, and that was the answer to the question suggesting itself to my mind in following out the train of thought I have just tried to give an idea of. The question—what will Guy do

with his genius if throughout his life it finds no outward vent? The answer—it will become an inward flame, scorching up his healthiest feelings, and intensifying any sorrow or disappointment that destiny may have in store for him.

I believed then, and I believe now, that to some few persons is granted a wonderful prescience with regard to the future of those they dearly love. They see the years to come mapped out and encircled with white or black lines as the case may be, and they hear the far off music, either sad or joyous, that will play the accompaniment to the life's march of the individual in whom they are interested. This is not a gift to be coveted, nor is it one that we can reject at will; it might be sometimes turned to good account if the torrent of human passion were ever capable of being arrested by words of warning or of threat, but as it is, I imagine that neither the loving nor the loved is benefited by it; and for my own

part I have often devoutly wished that the fairies had bestowed a gift of a more ordinary kind on me.

From my dreamy and most unsatisfactory meditations concerning Guy, I came, in the natural course of things, to think a little about Gertrude, and to wonder (for I had no remarkable foresight as regarded my sister, though I loved her dearly too) what her future would be like. She was far too attractive—that the dullest person could see—to remain long a schoolmistress, however strong might be, at present, her own inclinations towards that most prosaic and monotonous calling. Without Guy's genius, without even my ideality, Gertrude was intellectual, thoughtful, and capable, I believed, of very warm, enthusiastic feelings. Hitherto she had made duty her sole guide and prompter, and this duty, conducting her along the beaten path of dry, scholastic studies, she had pursued it as diligently and faithfully as if it had been a flowery maze leading to some brilliant arcadia.

But would it be always thus? Was there no deeper music within her that would waken up by and bye at the touch of one skillful hand; that would, once awakened, never sleep again, but flood all her life with richest harmony, or with the most piteous discord?

Dear, dear Gertie! good girl, calm, peaceful heart, what treasures would the advancing waves of time deposit at her feet; what pearls from the great ocean of the future should I, who loved her so, deem fair enough to bind upon that pure and spotless brow?

I had wandered, in the intense pre-occupation of my mind, some distance beyond a little bridge about the centre of the meadow that I should have crossed to reach the village. Discovering my error, and at the same time arriving at the conclusion that it was getting very late, I thought I might take advantage of some stepping stones laid across the stream and so avoid going over a second time the ground I had already traversed. It was by no means a difficult undertaking, and I accom-

plished it safely, and with no other inconvenience than a little wetting of my boots, which made me look down at them ruefully, and even sigh audibly (though I should have laughed the next moment) inasmuch as they happened to be my best, and I was not likely to have another pair very soon.

To my astonishment, and even momentary alarm (for I had not seen a living creature in all my walk) there came suddenly a merry, ringing laugh from the opposite side of the stream, and, before I had time to turn round, a male figure had sprung lightly over the same stones I had just so slowly and cautiously trodden on, and was standing, hat in hand, beside me.

“Mr. Kenyon! Good evening, though you have scarcely left me presence of mind to say so much. Why did you startle me in this way?”

“I could not really help it. I am, however, very sincerely ashamed of myself, Miss

Beamish, and I came across to ask you to forgive my rudeness. My road lies in a different direction."

"What were you laughing at?"

"I must confess, I suppose, even at the risk of not obtaining your pardon. It was an irresistible and very naughty impulse that prompted me to laugh at the droll way in which, after so gracefully accomplishing the feat of traversing these rough stones, you stood looking down at your wet boots. If I had only had my sketch book with me, I should have been tempted, instead of laughing, to have made a picture of the scene. But do say I am forgiven, for indeed I feel my rudeness laying like a heavy weight upon my conscience."

"Take it off at once then," I replied, quite inclined to laugh now myself. "I can readily believe I cut a most ridiculous figure, but you see I thought myself all alone."

"Yes, I was aware of that. I had, how-

ever, been at a very short distance from you for at least five minutes. I came along the path running at right angles from the one you were following, and should have turned in the opposite direction if your apparently sudden idea of trying the stepping stones had not chained me as an admiring watcher to the spot. I really hope though your feet are not very wet—nothing gives cold so soon.”

“Oh, thank you,” I said, “they are scarcely wet at all, and I shall walk fast enough to dry them in ten minutes. Don’t let me detain you, Mr. Kenyon, if you are pursuing your walk, as you told me, in an opposite direction.”

“The truth is,” he replied, smiling, but appearing in no hurry to move on, “I am, or was, bound for Lindenhurst with a message from Mrs. Vivian to the lady of the mansion. Having met you, Miss Beamish, I think I may deliver it here, and then perhaps you will accept my escort to whatever remote district you are wending your way. It is getting too

late for young ladies to be so far from home alone."

Utterly bewildered by this free and easy address and by his apparent familiarity with the name of our abode, I replied to him by a string of questions which must have betrayed my very puzzled state of mind.

"Whatever can you mean, Mr. Kenyon?" I asked. "Am I asleep, or have I misunderstood your words? Mrs. Vivian and mamma scarcely know each other. What message could the lady of Fell House possibly have to send to Lindenhurst, and why should you be chosen to carry it?" Then, as a sudden thought struck me, I felt my cheeks burn while I added—"Is it anything about my cousin, Miss Kauffman?"

"Oh, dear no," he hastened to answer, "nothing of the kind. Miss Kauffman is well, and happy, I have every reason to believe. By the bye, I had a long talk with her last night about you and your sister. We stayed to dinner at Beechwood, and she en-

chanted everybody again with her magnificent voice. In the course of the evening we got up a little dance; it was famous fun, I assure you, though I am no great dancer myself, and it was during a promenade through the rooms after a quadrille, that Miss Kauffman gave me a sketch of Lindenhurst and its fair inmates."

"Indeed!" I said, rather coldly. "It was very obliging of her."

"Well, it certainly was in this case," he replied, frankly, "because I had been impertinent enough to ask questions about you. One of my peculiarities, Miss Beamish, is an intense interest in every new mind that is brought under my notice. I am an enthusiastic student of minds, in the same way that some men are students of inanimate nature. Will you accuse me of flattery if I say that I discovered immediately on being introduced to your sister and yourself that you had each of you a very superior, though

totally distinct mental organization, and that it was this conviction which tempted me to the presumption of asking questions about you. If I have done wrong I can only say I am sorry, and I am sure you are too good to continue angry with me."

"I don't know that there is anything to be angry about," I admitted, though really I felt far from grateful. "Miss Kauffman's information, even as regards myself, must have been exceedingly limited, and with regard to my sister she saw her for the first time yesterday."

"So I discovered ; but she seemed to know as much about her as if they had lived together for years. She spoke most highly of you both, I assure you."

"What did she say of Gertrude?" I asked this as if I meant it to be answered, and, amused, I think, at my earnestness, he replied :—

"She said your beautiful sister was cold

and calm, and pure as a statue of snow, that she always did what was right and never anything that was wrong ; that study was her passion, and romance and poetry mere idle words without a meaning for her ; that her one ambition was to train up other young ladies to be as clever and duty-loving and sober-minded as herself ; that, in short, she was a flesh and blood Minerva, to whom destiny, in a mood of undue favouritism, had given the face and form of a Venus. This last, at any rate, I could endorse as the truth. The rest was difficult to believe."

If Mr. Kenyon expected me to discuss my sister's character with him, he must have been disappointed. To all he told me I said not a word. I only enquired abruptly what was the message with which he had been entrusted by Mrs. Vivian.

"True, we were forgetting that!" he answered, with a tact in discerning my repugnance to pursue the other topic which I did not fail to appreciate. "The very simple

truth is just this—Lizzie Vivian has a birthday coming in a few days; she will be fifteen, and her small ladyship wants to have a party given in her honour. They talked over the matter at Beechwood last night, and I believe it was Mrs. Hallam (by the bye, what a superb old lady it is!) who suggested that the Miss Beamishes and—and, let me see, a young girl living with two elderly aunts in the village, should be invited on the occasion. Mrs Vivian warmly applauded the idea, accompanying it with some eulogistic remarks which I must not venture to repeat. This evening when she was asking Miss Kauffman if she would like to have the carriage, and be the bearer of the invitation, I volunteered to do it without the carriage, and was accepted as a substitute. You have now the whole case before you, Miss Beamish, and shall decide whether I had better go on to Lindenhurst or not.”

“ If,” I said, “ an answer is required, I fear you must have the trouble of going on. I

don't know at all what mamma will decide, or even what Gertrude would wish. We have never been to Fell House, and next week our pupils are to arrive."

"Indeed I must not take back a refusal, or pretty Lizzie will cry her eyes out. She wants as many young ladies and gentlemen as can possibly be got together on so brief a notice. Mrs. Vivian begged me to say she should esteem your coming as a great favour, and that the carriage should both take you and bring you home again."

"Well, I suppose there will be no objection raised, as Mrs. Vivian is so kind about it. I must get on to the village now, Mr. Kenyon, or I shall be reported lost. Good evening."

He shook hands with me, repeated an earnest hope that we might meet again on the birthday, asked me a few directions concerning the way to Lindenhurst, and then, leaping the brook, pursued with swift steps the path I had recently come down.

Not less swiftly did I continue my route to

the village, vexed at having been so long detained, and all the course of my thoughts altered by this unexpected rencontre at the stepping stones.

It was quite dusk, when at length I stood at the little white gate leading into the patch of ground, called the front garden, of the Miss Downings' cottage.

Jane Norton sat with the cat beside her, and a piece of bread and butter in her hand on the wooden bench of the porch outside the door. She was looking very tired, very listless, and very much unlike the bright young lady of yesterday.

"Goodness, is that you, Miss Ethel?" she exclaimed, rising with some alacrity as I came up the gravel path. "Oh, havn't we had a miserable day! I never was so weary of any day in my life. Of course you have heard about poor Aunt Dora?"

"Yes; I have come purposely to learn how she is to-night."

"I think she's asleep now. Mr. Luke was

here about an hour ago, and he said he would send her something to make her go to sleep. She is very ill, indeed, you know, and Aunt Harriet is in a fearful state about her. The house has been in such confusion all day—no regular meals nor anything. I have not been allowed near the sick room, and except the doctor and Mr. Wyke I have neither seen nor spoken to a human being since the morning. I wish they would let me do something to help—it's very miserable to be kept in idleness and solitude a whole day."

"So it is, Jane; but perhaps your Aunt Harriet feared this illness might prove to be infectious. Did you say the vicar had called?"

"Yes; he has been here twice, and offered to send one of his servants to assist in the house if it should be needed. Mr. Luke thinks now, however, that it will turn out to be only a very bad nervous attack. He told me so himself when he came down-stairs this last time."

"Then I hope Miss Downing is less anxious. She will grow ill too if she takes her sister's illness so much to heart."

"I think Mr. Burns is sure to come over to-morrow," said Jane, suddenly dropping her voice to a whisper, "and that will do Aunt Harriet good."

"Did he stay with you at all after he had brought you home yesterday evening, Jane?" I asked, not to seem devoid of interest in the matter.

"No; he would not even get out of the carriage, which was to take him back to Boltby. By the bye, Miss Ethel, how did you enjoy your drive with the vicar?"

"Very well, Jane, thank you. And now I must say good night; see how dark it is growing."

"And the house is too dreary and uncomfortable for me to press you to stay. Will either of you be coming this way to-morrow?"

"Perhaps—most likely. We shall be

anxious to know how Miss Dora is going on."

Then we said good night again, and I chose the shortest road this time, and ran nearly all the way home.

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